

Akaoni: Contract with a Vampire

Hiroro

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Akaoni
Contract with a Vampire
Vol.1

Hiroro

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Hiroro

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Akaoni: Contract with a Vampire

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Chapter 1: Red Eyes

EVERYTHING was dark when she came to her senses. Attempting to rub the blurred vision from her eyes made it painfully obvious her arms were bound. Every wiggle caused her knees and elbows to scrape against wooden walls with a bang as she struggled against the ropes.

Azusa Saito, age seventeen, was currently tied up and shoved into a box like a folded piece of laundry.

“Mnngh!” Confused by her predicament, she tried to shout for help, only to be muffled by the towel shoved in her mouth. In a panic she kicked the wall with all her strength, but it didn’t budge; it only brought more problems.

“Hey! Shut up back there!” a man threatened. A kick rattled the box and her in it.

Azusa gasped. The sharp intake of air brought with it a calculating calm and a rapid comprehension of her situation.

Am I possibly a victim of kidnapping? Are they after money? Or human trafficking? She shuddered in fear at the thought.

Azusa’s flaxen hair was just long enough to reach below her shoulders on her school blazer. Her biggest complex was her shorter than average height. It seemed unlikely she had been kidnapped for her looks. Money seemed far-fetched too—it should have been easy to find out her father was a town doctor who wouldn’t have enough money to pay for a ransom. They actually fell on the poor end of the financial spectrum since her kindhearted father rarely accepted payment for his work.

Azusa took over the family finances since the death of her mother, which always led to fights with her father. The fights were one-sided, with Azusa getting angry and lecturing her father, who evaded her ire every time like a slippery eel.

She wasn’t from a rich family and considered herself average looking. She had no idea why anyone would want to kidnap a normal high school girl who was extremely fond of sweets and all things cute, good at cleaning, penny-pinching, and kendo, but everything about her situation pointed to it being a kidnapping. At least to her.

The constant vibration she felt through the box and low-hum of an engine led her to believe she was in a car. She strained her ears to hear men talking. Likely two to three of them. She couldn’t remember the kidnapping itself. Her memories blacked out some point on her way home from her afterschool club.

Did they knock me out? My clothes aren’t ripped or dirty, so it’s unlikely I struggled. I don’t feel hurt anywhere either. I don’t know how long I was unconscious for, but it’s likely night now. The occasional light

seeping through the cracks in this box looks like the artificial light cast by streetlights.

The best thing she could do in her current predicament was to calmly and accurately break down the situation in a way she could use every piece of information to her advantage if the chance to escape came up.

All of a sudden, she heard the screech of metal grating against metal. Her body slammed against the opposite side of the box, followed by an intense jolt that rattled the entire vehicle.

Did the car crash into something? An accident?

One of the car doors opened. Undaunted by the angry bellows of the men who had kidnapped her, Azusa strained her voice to scream through the cloth in her mouth. She kicked and slammed her body against the box. This was her only chance to be saved.

Someone notice me! Please!

“Mngh!” She frantically kicked the box and screamed despite the cloth choking her.

“Oh, looks like this is the package. Kou! I found her!” shouted a man who sounded younger than the gangsters she heard talking in the car. He easily opened the container with his bare hands as if he were tearing apart a prison cell made of paper, not wood. The wood shattered at his touch—a feat that couldn’t be written off as just being physically strong. But Azusa wasn’t in a state to pay that fact much thought. The strength and tension left her at her presumed safety.

“You all right, miss?” asked a young man who peered into the box with catlike eyes and a friendly smile. His luxurious hair was neatly held in place with gel. His gelled hair and suit combined to give the impression he was from some male host club.

“Can you stand? Are you hurt anywhere?” he asked in a gentle tone as he helped her up. He pulled the towel out of her mouth and undid the rope cutting into her arms. Azusa slowly got out of the car with his support.

But there were some things she should have realized sooner: the lack of her captors’ screams and the deep-red dyeing the hands of the young man smiling gently beside her.

Another man stood in the middle of three corpses, their blood pooling at his feet. He was clad in a black coat that reached his ankles. Red, almost ruby-like, eyes peeked through his black hair fluttering in the wind. Azusa stepped forward, drawn in by the unworldly scene before her. Something squished beneath her foot. She looked down, and as soon as she saw a dismembered ear, her vision gave way to darkness.

THE man smothered his cigarette into the car's ashtray. He was burning through fewer cigarettes today—a good sign that he wasn't agitated. From the driver's seat he watched a colleague carry the wooden container through a rearview mirror.

"Today's job is a breeze. And one where we'll collect a hefty payment. I want more jobs like this," smiled another colleague from the passenger's seat as the container was shoved into the back of the minivan.

"Why don't you try telling the boss that? He might negotiate with the group for you."

"You make scary suggestions sometimes, y'know? Underlings like us complainin' about our work will only get us killed and harvested for our organs."

"No kiddin'," the driver chuckled and started the ignition.

"Oi! We need to hurry! Not makin' it to the meeting place on time is what's gonna get us killed!" shouted the man with a shaved head in the back seat as he angrily kicked the back of the driver's seat.

"Sure, sure. We need to be at Kisaza Port by 1:00 a.m., right? Piece of cake. We've got plenty of time," the driver said and stepped on the gas.

The men were low-level members of the Yellow Dragon Syndicate that exercised its authority over the surrounding area. They were usually given jobs involving the sale of illegal drugs, collecting overdue debts, and setting up stalls at festivals. All they ever got assigned were extremely dangerous jobs with little profit or safe jobs with barely any profit.

But the job they were assigned this time had them kidnapping the girl in a picture and delivering her to a predetermined location. Not only were all the tools necessary for kidnapping her provided, such as the sedative to knock her out and the exact time and place she'd be alone, but the compensation was ten times their normal rate.

"I feel like this job is too good to be true. Way too good," the man in the passenger's seat grumbled worriedly.

"It'll be fine! Just means lady luck is finally on our side!" laughed the driver.

"I also thought they could have done it themselves instead of asking us when they already had everything prepared," the man with a shaved head voiced his suspicions from the back seat.

"You guys are serious worriers! I mean, isn't this for the group's regular customer? Probably works a job where he can't get his own hands dirty. Maybe it's for a politician?"

"I guess it could be." The man in the passenger's seat was satisfied by his explanation. He folded his arms and sat back into his seat. The driver looked through the rearview mirror at the man with a

shaved head. He showed no signs of further argument.

BANG!

The container moved. The men heard a faint moan from it.

“Hey! Shut up back there!” the man with a shaved head kicked the container. Apparently, their target woke up.

There was no telling what the girl would do inside the box once she caught onto her situation and fell into despair. Her value would decrease if she tried to commit suicide or hurt herself.

“We need to quickly deliver the goods now that she’s up! What a pain!” The driver stepped on the gas. The silver minivan increased its speed to race down the freeway; few cars were in its way because of the time of night.

After thirty minutes at a high speed, the deserted port came into view. The driver sighed with relief at the sight—too soon to be relieved.

A black silhouette appeared right in front of the car. He was looking forward the entire time, but the silhouette came out of nowhere. The car and silhouette slammed into each other before the driver recognized it as a person. Yet the collision sounded nothing like running a person over.

It was no different from two cars crashing into each other. Without his seatbelt on, the driver crashed through the windshield and rolled onto the ground in front of the minivan. The intense impact to his body ripped the breath right out of his lungs. His arm bent at an impossible angle for the bone to be intact.

A man clad in a swaying black trench coat stood before him with one bare hand on the front of the car. The fender bent around his hand where he stopped it. His eyes were such a deep, glowing red they couldn’t be human. Every part of the driver’s instincts screamed at him telling him the man in front of him was not human. It was a monster.

The red-eyes turned and locked onto the driver. The man slowly walked toward him. Fear rendered him speechless. Every fiber of his body commanded him to run, but he couldn’t get up. He heard the guttural bellow of his colleagues then. From the corner of his eye he watched his two colleagues, one with a knife and the other a metal bat, charge at the red-eyed man.

“DON’T!” the driver screamed, unsure of whom he was trying to stop. Was he telling his colleagues not to charge at the monster? Or was he yelling at the red-eyed monster about to kill them?

Everything was over in an instant. One side-swing of the arm by the red-eyed monster severed one of the men’s heads from his body. He repeated the motion a second time to take off the other’s head. The driver saw blood dripping from the right hand that had ripped

through his colleagues.

“Hey, Kou! You forgot one!” The driver heard someone say above him. He looked up to see a man of delicate features and light-brown hair. The man with feline eyes raised his fist and darkness consumed the driver.

Chapter 2: An Unfamiliar Ceiling

HE stood alone amid the pools of blood. Not a single emotion flickered on his face as he looked at Azusa. With his black hair and trench coat billowing in the wind, he looked nothing short of the grim reaper standing in dominion over the headless corpses of the dead. For some reason, Azusa didn't feel afraid of him. If anything, an indescribable sense of nostalgia welled-up inside her upon seeing his red eyes.

AZUSA opened her heavy eyes to an unfamiliar ceiling. She looked around the room from where she lay on a bed. The room was of such splendor she thought, *Is this what a noble's room looks like in Europe?*

Expensive-looking furniture and fixtures furnished the spacious room. Several long seconds later, she noticed the canopy hanging above her. A chandelier lit the room.

"Where am I?"

"Are you awake? I'm coming in."

"Huh? Oh, okay!" Azusa answered quickly upon hearing a vaguely familiar voice outside the door.

The door opened revealing a friendly young man with feline eyes. Azusa gasped upon seeing his fluffy brown hair. The mist clouding her mind cleared a little.

"Th-The kidnapper—"

"I'm on the side that rescued you though." He smiled wryly.

"Oh, I'm sorry! Thank you very much for that!" Azusa quickly bowed her head.

Right, I owe him my life!

"No need for thanks. Saving you was my job. Besides, we're not much different from them."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm Subaru. I hope we can get along, Azusa."

Azusa shook the hand he held out to her. And then it dawned on her.

"Um, how do you know my name?"

"I'll explain things in order for you. But before that...you guys can come in now!" Subaru shouted at the door. A woman with her hair tied back in a ponytail entered the room. She had almond eyes set in an androgynous face. Pure-white clothing with a stand-up collar complimented both her tall height and long legs. Directly behind her

was—

“Dad!”

“Azusa!”

Azusa’s father. He wore a battered white robe and his hair was unkempt. His eyes filled with tears behind his fogged-up glasses. He ran over to Azusa and hugged her.

“Are you all right? Are you hurt anywhere? Did they do anything to you?”

“I-I’m okay! I’m not hurt. Subaru saved me after all!”

“I see! Thank goodness. I’m so relieved... I’m sorry. I am so sorry. Azusa, I—”

“D-Dad?! What’s wrong?”

Her dad buried his face in her shoulder and sobbed. Azusa was flustered from seeing her dad cry for the first time. Subaru watched them with a sidelong glance as he continued the conversation.

“Let me introduce you. This beautiful lady right here is Ichi. She’s your bodyguard,” Subaru said pointing to the woman with a ponytail. The woman gave a slight nod in response. Then Subaru pointed to Azusa’s dad crying on her shoulder. “And the man crying on your shoulder is...the person who created you per the Blue Coven’s orders and is responsible for the crime of abducting you.”

Time stopped. Azusa couldn’t comprehend a single thing he said. What did she need a bodyguard for? What did he mean she was created? Who abducted who?

“What are you talking about?”

“Do you believe in vampires?” His eyes were dead serious.

Chapter 3: The Ones Known as Vampires

“**DO** you believe in vampires?”

It was an abrupt question containing the surreal term, *vampire*. For a moment, she contemplated if he was joking, but apparently he wasn't. Subaru's eyes were dead serious.

He continued speaking with all seriousness, “You might not believe me, but we are vampires.”

“...Excuse me?” She couldn't help but ask back. She thought she may have misheard him, but what word could she possibly confuse for vampire?

What's wrong with this guy? Is he mentally ill?

She frowned. Seeing her reaction, Subaru smiled sadly. “Yup, that's the typical reaction. I knew it was coming... But it's the truth. Ichi is one too, as well as all the servants hired to serve here. While I'm at it, you can pretty much say almost everyone in this city is of the species known as vampires.”

“...By vampires, you mean the creatures that drink blood? The same ones that can't handle garlic and turn to ash under the sun?”

“That's the one. We're also known as bloodsuckers or Nosferatu.”

“Hah...but...”

Azusa glanced outside the window. It was sunny out. Unobstructed sunlight streamed in through the window, yet the man claiming to be a vampire was doing just fine.

“We have different concepts of common sense from humans, but the majority of vampires can live the same lifestyles as you do. We can be active under the sun and even eat garlic. Well, I guess you can say we're nocturnal when it comes down to it. Our bodies are lighter and our powers are stronger at night,” Subaru added, noticing the furrow in Azusa's brow.

“I'm sorry. I don't believe you,” Azusa flatly declared. “Your explanation isn't substantive with the available evidence. You suddenly claimed that my dad is a kidnapper with the added nonsense he created me. You didn't even explain why Miss Ichi is guarding me. Anyway, what on Earth do I need a bodyguard for? Is someone after me? And then, to top off all the insanity, you further declare you are all vampires! Just what part of this ridiculousness am I supposed to believe? I am grateful you rescued me, but my gratitude doesn't mean I'll automatically believe anything you say,” Azusa rattled on and glared at him.

Subaru was taken by surprise for a moment, before cracking a smile. “I lost that round. Really can't judge a book by its cover, huh? You didn't look like the strong-willed type.”

“My friends often tell me that. They say I could get by seeming like a docile girl if I keep my mouth shut.”

Subaru burst out laughing. “I agree completely! Yup, that’s so true! Aah, don’t get me wrong. It’s not that you look docile—ah, but, you do look it. I guess it was wrong of me to expect you to unconditionally believe everything I’ve said without proof.”

“...What are you going to do then?”

“Guess I’ll show you some proof. You good with that, Ichi?”

“Yes.” At his comment, Ichi undid the hook on her shirt collar and stepped forward.

“Go ahead,” she said, boldly exposing her neck. Subaru bit down on the exposed vein.

Bloodsucking was nothing like the elegant and alluring scenes portrayed in saucy romance novels across the world. It was not unlike the cruel, but necessary acts of survival a predator undertakes while eating its prey. It felt similar to the time she watched a snake swallow a mouse whole.

“...!” She couldn’t help but gasp at the scene before her. Graphic was the best word suited for the slurping and gurgling sounds she heard coming from Subaru’s throat. It couldn’t have lasted for more than ten seconds, but the shocking nature of what she witnessed made it feel longer.

“Thank you, Ichi.”

“No need for thanks, as long as you do the same for me next time.”

“Of course.” Subaru lift his face from Ichi’s neck, wiping the blood from his lips. Azusa sucked in her breath when he slowly turned toward her. At a glimpse, nothing had changed. However, both of his eyes glowed now.

“...Red.”

“My eyes? Yeah, they are, because I drank blood,” he answered and deliberately stood in front of the dresser.

“Can you see me?”

“What?”

Subaru waved at the mirror attached to the dresser. He didn’t show up in the mirror’s reflection.

“Have you ever heard about how vampires don’t show up in mirrors? Well, we’ll show up normally if we haven’t just had blood... Also,” he gently touched the mirror with his index finger—the mirror instantly cracked, webbing from where his finger touched, “we’re stronger in this state too.”

“Wow...”

Azusa recalled how he saved her by shattering the wooden container she was in with his bare hands, even though it didn’t dent

after all her kicking. She didn't have her wits about her to realize it at the time, but that was undeniably an inhuman feat.

"Do you believe me now?"

"....." Unable to honestly say yes, Azusa kept silent. Her father placed his large hand on her head.

"Everything he said is true. They are vampires. I'm human, but I once assisted in a research project at their laboratory."

"Dad..." After some hesitance, Azusa turned to Subaru and reluctantly nodded.

"I'm glad to see you believe me. Let's get to the main point now then." Subaru's expression tensed. Azusa straightened up to brace herself for what he was going to reveal next.

Chapter 4: The Ones Known as Vampires 2

“OUR species is on the verge of extinction,” Subaru slowly explained, sitting back into his chair.

“Vampires are?” Azusa asked.

“Yes. Although, it’s not like it’s going to happen in the next year or two. But our numbers are gradually decreasing. I guess you could say the main cause is crossbreeding with humans too much. The bloodline has grown too thin.”

“What happens when it grows thin? Will you eventually become normal humans or something like that?”

Subaru quietly shook his head. “Even if our vampiric blood weakens, our bodies are still that of a vampire. We won’t become human. We were never human to start with. Those from a weak bloodline turn into nothing more than bloodsucking monsters who lose all sense of reason and act only on instinct. We call those monsters Fs and make our rounds to dispose of them. As such, our numbers are decreasing with every year.”

Subaru looked down sorrowfully, giving the impression he witnessed more than one Fs’ disposal. “...So then we started to think: is there anything we can do to become human?”

“Become human? Can you do that?”

“We have yet to discover any means to turn a vampire into a human. Despite the fact we don’t differ much from humans on a genetic level, we can’t pass the barrier into humanity. And while we were waiting to see where that research would take us, the Blues went ahead and started researching the complete opposite thing.”

“Blues?” Azusa cocked her head in puzzlement. She could have sworn she heard him mention them earlier too.

“Oh, I forgot to explain,” he quickly switched topics, “We actually aren’t a united front or species either. There are three races among vampires, which correspond to our red, blue, and yellow eye color. The Red Coven is a moderate faction that wants to have friendly relations with humans. The Blue Coven is an aggressive faction that is antagonistic toward humans. And the Yellow Coven is neutral. It doesn’t really matter to normal vampires, but the nobles and leaders are in a three-way struggle. On another note, I think you should have noticed already, but we’re the Red Coven. The moderate, human-friendly faction.”

“So the people from the Blue Coven conducted a different research in secret from the Red Coven?”

“Yup. They conducted research to revive the Ancient without permission. The Ancient is the strongest vampire the rest of us are

descended from... And you are the successful result of their experiments, Azusa.”

“What?” Azusa’s mind drew a blank.

What the heck did Subaru just say? The successful result of their experiments? I am? That’s what he said? He said that, didn’t he? But I’m just a normal high school girl! I believe I am a 100% pure human born between a human father and human mother! In the first place, I don’t even want blood! I have never wanted to drink blood!

“...I believe you have the wrong person,” she hoarsely squeezed out after a pause.

Subaru answered with a sympathetic smile. “Hm, we also wish that were true, but... Can you explain the rest for yourself, *dad*? Or should I say, Mister Shinji Saito?”

Subaru turned the conversation over to Azusa’s father. She heard her father gasp beside her when their eyes met.

“Azusa...I created you. At the Blue’s research laboratory the vampires borrowed Yayoi’s power to recreate the Ancient’s blood, because recreating the body wasn’t possible.”

“By Yayoi you mean...Mom? You’re talking about Mom, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I am. Yayoi was one of the women kidnapped by the Blue Coven.”

“...!” Azusa was speechless. Her heart was pounding in her ears. Her father continued speaking before her mind could catch up.

“I actually didn’t know about the research until it was in the final stages. I wasn’t of a particularly high position within the laboratory at the time—I was just a man who loved genetics. I had overheard one of the teams was involved in an experiment to revive the Ancient one, but I wrote it off as having nothing to do with me. I also predicted their methods wouldn’t succeed.” His clenched fists trembled as he spoke. She could only watch him in silence.

“And then the experiment failed as I thought it would. That’s when one of the men helping with my research asked if I wanted to take part in the next experiment. I used all my knowledge to tell him how I would have done things differently. I detailed how I would have prevented their failure and what the best methods would be. It was just a simple chat to me at the time. But six months later the man brought Yayoi to me—she was pregnant with the child who was to become the Ancient.”

“.....”

“I escaped from the laboratory with Yayoi after that. I had no idea when the Blues would come to take Yayoi and the child she carried away, so we moved from place to place. You were born several months later, Azusa.”

Azusa couldn't see her father's expression with the way he hung his head. But his trembling shoulders spoke of what he endured. His reaction revealed his words weren't a lie.

"...But...but I'm not a vampire! I don't want blood!"

She wanted him to deny it. She wanted him to say that she was his daughter born between him and her mother, and not some artificial life created in a test-tube experiment. She grabbed her father's arm. He placed his hand on top of hers. The gentle, large hand that had always been there to support her frightened her.

"Your body is human. I only reproduced the blood. As such, you won't desire blood nor require it to survive."

That's not what I want to hear you say. What I want you to say is—

"Was I...was I...ever a daughter to you, Dad?"

"...!"

Azusa heard her father's shocked gasp. That was enough for her. He didn't immediately affirm what she said. In other words, the man she believed was her father until this day apparently never thought of her as a daughter.

"...I understand," Azusa said in a resigned tone.

"Azusa!" Her father, Shinji, grabbed her shoulders in a panic.

"I take it that was good enough proof for you?" Subaru interjected, softly removing Shinji's hands from her. "I believe I explained enough for you to understand that your kidnapping was instigated by the Blue Coven. And they will come for you again. We can't have you fall into the Blue's hands and risk strengthening their forces. So why don't you stay at this mansion for a while? I promise we will provide you with everything you need."

"...What happens if I say no?"

"We were given orders to stop you from leaving with force. I don't want to do that, so I sure hope you won't say no."

It was his roundabout way of saying this was not a request. Azusa could only nod once she understood.

Chapter 5: The Girl Known as Azusa Saito

HER natural mindset is to avoid overly complicated matters which clashes with her stubborn personality. It goes without saying her personality and looks do not match—she is frequently said to have a docile appearance. Whether that is a good thing or not is undetermined. Her favorite motto is, “It is easier to do something than worry about it.”

You would come to her grade point average faster if you started from the bottom, but she did keep the top rank in PE since the day she started school. Once she entered the kendo club in high school she excelled until she was skilled enough to take part in nationals. Her exemplary physical prowess kept her in high demand as a supporting player for all of the sports clubs on campus.

Cooking and sewing became a normal part of her life since the day she lost her mother. As such, her grades in home economics are far from lacking. Furthermore, her greatest skill of all is money management. She is terrible at math, but calculating taxes is her forte. Keeping her shopping bill at exactly 2,000 yen without using a calculator is a cinch for her.

A strong-willed, athletic, family-oriented miser—that is what Ichi learned from the report about the girl known as Azusa Saito. She massaged the bridge of her nose before tossing the report aside.

ICHI was feeling perplexed lately. The situation unfolding before her had her wondering what the job she was given three days ago was for. If she wasn’t mistaken, her orders should have been to, “Observe and guard a girl called Azusa Saito. Watching over her includes supporting her in daily life and general assistance when necessary. You are free to use force if she attempts to escape. You can go as far as removing her legs and arms if necessary, as long as it doesn’t kill her.”

Those less than peaceful and rather savage orders had Ichi imagining herself tying a sobbing girl up like a pig for the slaughter, but reality showed the complete opposite from what she expected.

“Ichi, please eat before it gets cold. I tried making a rolled Japanese-style omelet today.”

“Okay,” is all Ichi could say in response to the food placed in front of her. She was aware of her taciturn personality, but her lack of

words today was for another reason.

Azusa was in the kitchen since the early hours of the morning zealously making breakfast. She hummed while she cooked too. Ichi was at her wits' end; this was a completely unexpected turn of events.

Azusa had been undeniably docile on the first day. By all appearances, she was a typical example of Pitiful Captured Girl A. The second day brought her to request permission to go jogging in the garden. Ichi kept her guard up against any possible attempts of escape, but there wasn't even an inkling of her wanting to. The day ended with Azusa's request to make dinner. And now she was making breakfast on the third day.

The servants, who were supposed to make breakfast for her originally, watched helplessly from the corner of the room. Ichi was given permission to allow Azusa to do as she pleased within the mansion grounds from the day she was assigned the job, but it felt like she was doing more with that permission than they anticipated.

"By the way, Azusa, this has been on my mind since yesterday, but why are you making food for me too?"

"What? You don't like Japanese-style omelets?"

"...No, I do not have a problem with the food..."

Miso soup, rice, grilled fish, rolled omelets, and pickled vegetables for two sat on the table. It was the epitome of the perfect Japanese-style breakfast seen on cooking shows.

"Vampires eat food normally like humans, right?"

"We do. It depends on the person, but as long as there are no abnormal circumstances, we only need to drink blood once every two to three months. The rest of our nutrients and calories are provided by normal food."

Too much crossbreeding with humans allowed vampires to reduce their need for blood by sustaining their energy with food. The weaker the vampire, the less frequently they required blood. About once every two to three months was all the average vampire needed. More powerful vampires could last about a month before requiring more blood.

Ichi explained about vampires to Azusa during their first day together. She recalled how inquisitive Azusa was about every little detail. Thinking about the course of events since then turned Pitiful Captured Girl A into a gradually more suspicious façade.

"Then dig in," Azusa suggested.

"....."

What does she mean by dig in? A normal person wouldn't serve food to the person keeping them locked up. Does this girl have nerves of steel or something?

"Please eat with me. It's boring to eat alone... Dad isn't here now

either.”

“...All right. Thank you for the food.” Ichi gave in and brought the food to her mouth. Azusa sat beside her and started eating her share.

The man who *had been* Azusa’s father was taken away by Subaru after their conversation on the first day. Neither she nor Ichi had seen him since. Ichi assumed he was fated for a court of inquiry. While the Blue Coven arbitrarily continued the research in a different direction, the original goal of turning vampires into humans was a collaborative research project between the three covens. Shinji brought their research into the outside world. The Red Coven had every right to judge him for his crimes.

Ichi sympathized with Azusa. The man who raised her all these years turned out to be a complete stranger and told her she was a human created as the result of a research experiment. No doubt Ichi would have despised Shinji if she were in Azusa’s shoes.

But what about Azusa herself? Doubt casually crossed Ichi’s mind. *Just now she called Shinji, Dad. Is it possible she feels otherwise? No doubt she resents him for it. The answer should be as clear as day, but...*

“Do you resent Shinji, Azusa?” Ichi questioned to clear her doubt.

“...My dad?” Azusa froze, her eyes widening with surprise. “Of course I do!”

I knew it, Ichi thought at Azusa’s declaration.

“I mean, if your daughter asks you, ‘Was I ever a daughter to you?’, you should answer, ‘Of course!’ without a moment’s delay and hug her. Isn’t that what a parent does? He shouldn’t think too much about the complicated stuff like: we have different DNA or whether it’s okay for him to think of me as a daughter or if he has the right to-- and just give me a bear hug! That’s all he had to do! I plan on reprimanding him the next time I see him! Dad has always had a bad habit of letting all the complicated details get to him! I plan on using this opportunity to straighten him out!” Azusa ranted with puffed out cheeks.

“That sounds like you...are angry at him rather than resentful.”

“Good point. You can say that again!”

“Isn’t that all I can say about it?”

Her reaction is different from what I imagined. Ichi laughed as she watched Azusa’s face redden with anger.

“Also, while I did snap at him at the time out of confusion, I know full-well that he loved me like I was his real daughter, even though I wasn’t. Although I did brood over it until my head hurt at first,” Azusa smiled bashfully.

Ichi silently listened as Azusa went on with a gentle expression, “Contrary to his looks, Dad hates dogs. But he threw himself in front

of me to protect me when I was attacked by a wild dog, resulting in a bite requiring more stitches than I can remember. After he chased off the dog he pulled me into his blood-soaked arms and kept asking if I was okay. He was the one who wasn't okay. He tried to let me on the ambulance, but was stopped by the paramedic... When I remember Dad like that, I feel like an idiot for asking if he thought of me as a daughter. Oh, I should properly apologize for this later."

"You are...an interesting girl," Ichi laughed. Azusa stared at her curiously. She had no clue what was so funny.

"You think so?"

"I do. I thought how glad I am you are Azusa Saito."

If I have to be stuck with someone, I want it to be someone I can get along with. I don't know what is going to happen from here, but it would be agonizing to spend every day with someone I despise, Ichi thought.

"I'm also glad you are my bodyguard, Ichi."

Ichi responded with a faint smile and drank her miso soup. It was a relaxing morning lightly fragrant by miso.

Chapter 6: Escape

ONE week passed since Azusa's confinement within the vampire-owned mansion. She quickly adjusted to daily life there. At first, she worried what her life would be like, but as long as she had Ichi with her she could do almost anything within the mansion grounds without getting in trouble. Anything she asked Ichi for would be prepared immediately and brought to her by the next day at the latest. All things considered, they treated her well.

As such, she took it on herself to handle all her own cleaning, laundry, and cooking. Ichi constantly tried to stop her, informing her that the servants were there to handle those tasks, but Azusa would be bored to death if she let them do everything for her. She would be so bored she wouldn't know what to do with herself. Upon hearing that, Ichi gave up with a smile and let her do what she wanted. Azusa felt guilty, but extremely grateful.

She took full advantage of her freedom to bake sweets again today.

"You are a fantastic cook," Ichi commented, watching from where she stood near Azusa.

Azusa tilted her head, closely examining one of the freshly baked cookies in her right hand. "You think so? I often bake sweets rather than buy them because it's much cheaper. You can make a lot of icebox cookies at once and save them in the freezer for whenever you feel like eating them again later. I always bake more when I run out. Anyone can make cookies; all you do is mix ingredients together after all. Want to try making some with me, Ichi?"

"No, I..." Ichi mumbled, not finishing her reason for saying no.

"Ah..." Azusa muttered, remembering what happened the other day.

Two days ago Ichi had offered to help Azusa bake sweets, resulting in her launching pie dough onto the ceiling, burning apples into sweet little piles of char, and over boiling sugar until it turned to molten rock—they were trying to bake an apple pie.

"I'm sorry. I have never cooked anything until now," Ichi finally squeezed out.

"D-Don't worry about it! Let's begin with something simple next time!"

"Okay. Please guide me through the steps when the time comes."

"Sure! I'm looking forward to it too."

Azusa and Ichi bowed their heads at the same time. Azusa felt like she had established a good relationship with Ichi over the past week. However—

“By the way, Ichi, when can I see Dad again?”

“About that...”

Ichi would never give her a clear answer to this question.

“I do not know when either. I have put in a request to see him for the time being...” Ichi said evasively.

Both her not knowing anything and having put in a request were probably true, but Azusa couldn’t escape the feeling she was hiding something from her.

“Is that so? I baked some cookies for Dad too. Can you give them to him for me? Along with this letter,” Azusa requested, handing Ichi some wrapped cookies and a letter.

They had decided in advance which days she would bake sweets and have a portion brought to her father. In return, Ichi always returned with a letter written in her father’s terrible handwriting. He typically confined his letter to one page detailing his current situation and heartfelt apology. She kept it a secret that she felt how much he loved her from his constant apologies, despite finding them unnecessary after a week.

“Sure. In that case, I will deliver this to his handler. Please do not move from here while I am away, Azusa.”

“Thank you,” Azusa said and watched Ichi leave the kitchen. It suddenly dawned on her—she was all alone now.

This wasn’t the first time she had asked Ichi to deliver sweets and a letter to her father. It was Ichi who always brought her sweets to the handler who directly delivered it to her father. But whenever she left, another person came to take her place—no one came today.

“Is this a sign they have started to trust me?”

Trust I won’t run away.

Azusa had no intentions of running away. She went running several times with Ichi over the past week, during which she confirmed Ichi wasn’t human from how she kept up with her full-speed run without breaking a sweat. She was still dubious about the people around her being vampires, but she had no choice but to believe they weren’t human when they kept showing off inhuman athleticism.

Azusa didn’t have enough confidence in herself to escape from someone who ran laps around her without tiring. And she didn’t want to destroy the trust they built up so far when she knew she couldn’t succeed in escaping. Thus, running away wasn’t an option Azusa was considering.

“I wonder if Dad will be happy with my cookies.” She imagined her father accepting the cookies. She baked his favorite ginger cookies this time. She was convinced he would like them.

Azusa no longer felt the same irritation she had when she first

heard everything from Subaru. She wanted to hurry up and apologize for asking such a cruel question as, “Was I ever a daughter to you?” But their current circumstances didn’t allow her to.

Since Ichi still wasn’t back yet, she went ahead and brewed the coffee she was planning on drinking with her when she returned. Just as she took a seat at the table to enjoy her drink, she spotted a butterfly. Her vision blurred when the blue fluttering wings passed in front of her.

Did its scales get in my eyes? She thought, rubbing her eyes. She glimpsed something vaguely in the air. She heard voices as well.

“...Poor guy.”

“But isn’t it his own fault? If they’re going to kill him anyway, the least they can do is let him see his daughter one last time. Hasn’t he been saying how much he wants to see her?”

“Miss Azusa wants to see her dad too. At this rate, he’ll be killed before they see each other again.”

“It’s the end for him once the court of inquiry begins. No doubt Miss Azusa’s father will be killed.”

Through the vague image she saw in the air she made out three of the servants whom had been caring for her at the mansion.

“Dad is going to be killed?”

She overheard them discussing how he was going to be killed at the upcoming court of inquiry.

I have to save Dad!

She acted on a reflex—Azusa dashed off, not once stopping to think if the image she witnessed was real. The blue butterfly fluttered toward the door and disappeared as if it were sucked inside. Azusa followed behind it. She flung the door open and burst through it.

Chapter 7: Reunion

AZUSA burst through the kitchen door only to trip. She spun three times in the air and then tumbled onto the ground. She sat up after finishing her painful triple axel fall, only to see nothing but trees in front of her.

“Huh? Why trees?”

She glanced around her. Trees extended in every direction. She looked up to see the blue sky through the gaps of a green leafy canopy.

“No way.”

Her disbelief was understandable—she had fallen into an unfamiliar forest. She looked behind her to discover the door she burst out of had disappeared without a trace. She opened a door that should have led to a hallway but ended up in a forest instead. “What kind of bad joke is this? Either way, I have to hurry to where Dad is!”

Azusa was in full panic mode. Her mind wasn’t in a state to consider why she had ended up in a forest. All that was on her mind was quickly finding her father and confirming his safety. The servants’ conversation kept replaying in her mind.

“It’s the end for him once the court of inquiry begins. No doubt Miss Azusa’s father will be killed.”

Her vision blurred with unshed tears. She endured the desire to cry and pushed herself off the muddy ground, wiping the mud off her knees and clothes. The same scenery stretched out as far as the eye could see in every direction. Not knowing which direction to go meant any direction was worth a try.

She froze when the thicket in front of her rustled. A shadowy figure slowly clawed its way out of the thicket, revealing a man in his mid-twenties. His greasy, long disheveled hair clung to his face, hiding his expression from her, but his hollowed cheeks and sickly complexion stood out under the tangled mess.

The bottom of his tattered shirt and pants looked like they had been through a shredder. If Azusa were to sum up his appearance in one word, it would be zombie. He was the living embodiment of the zombies portrayed in horror movies. Maybe living was the wrong word.

“...!” Azusa gasped. The man sluggishly approaching her with a limp had blue glowing eyes.

“I. Found. You,” the man’s head torqued to the side like a broken doll and let out a demented laugh. His twisted smirk gave Azusa the chills. “No runnin’!”

He lunged at her.

“Agh!”

He slammed her against a tree the moment she tried to run. The impact knocked the breath out of her. She struggled to escape, but she didn't have enough strength to slip out of his grip. The man strengthened his hold on her neck where he pinned her against the tree.

“Let...go...of me!” she choked out.

“I. Found. You. Found. You. FOUND YOU!” The man shrieked deliriously, leaning his face toward hers. His dulled blue eyes glimmered with indescribable euphoria.

“No!”

“I found...you,” he spluttered. He opened his mouth revealing sharp, gleaming fangs.

He's going to bite me! Azusa tensed and shut her eyes. The next moment, the grip released its hold on her. *What? ...He's not going to bite me?*

She slowly opened her eyes to see the man's head at her feet. A headless body was all that pinned her against the tree. Blood erupted from the neck and rained down on her as though the body just realized it was missing its head. She couldn't even muster a scream as she watched on in a stupor. Her mind didn't comprehend what just happened.

“Are you okay?” A man with black hair and ruby-red eyes appeared in front of Azusa amid the blood-rain.

Azusa's mind rushed with a recent flashback so vivid it was strange she hadn't thought about it until now. Before her was the man who had been standing in a pool of blood the night she was kidnapped. He had been wearing a trench coat at the time, but now he donned a white T-shirt and black slacks. His clothes may have been different, but there was no mistaking him.

“Th-The guy from that night!” she stuttered.

“...Why are you here?” The man frowned the instant he saw Azusa's face. He stared at her for a good minute then sighed.

“Wh-What?”

“...”

The man approached Azusa with an expression she couldn't tell was angry or not, and removed the corpse from her. He grabbed her arm and pulled her to her feet—she didn't realize she had collapsed onto her butt—and walked off dragging her behind him.

“Um, er...”

“.....”

“Where are you taking me?”

“...Don't ask questions. Just keep quiet and follow me,” he commanded flatly.

For a second, she flinched. But she wasn't a meek girl who would stay silent just because someone demanded it from her.

"Please let go of me!" Azusa shouted, tugging her arm from him with all her strength. The man glowered at her.

"I can carry you instead if you insist," he growled in a deep voice.

Azusa lost the will to fight. No way could she stand up to him if he decided to use even a small percent of his strength. He was the man who instantaneously killed the zombie-like man whose arms Azusa couldn't even budge from her neck in a panicked frenzy. If she stupidly put up a fight against him now, it would likely end in him knocking her out and carrying her. In which case, following him while she was still conscious was by far the better choice.

"You are walking too fast," Azusa complained.

"....."

He surprisingly slowed his speed to match hers.

Chapter 8: And His Name was

AZUSA was dragged through the forest to a log cabin located in the middle of a small clearing.

“Go in,” the man said. He opened the door and pushed her inside. He followed her inside, locked the door behind him, and disappeared into the living room, leaving her alone in the mudroom.

Everything happened in a daze—Azusa still didn’t understand what was going on. She was under the impression he was going to drag her back to the mansion, but apparently that wasn’t what he had in mind.

A few minutes passed before he came back with a bath towel. He plopped it on her head and rubbed it back and forth over her hair. She felt like a dog he was trying to dry off after a bath.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Azusa shouted.

“You’ll make a mess if you come inside as dirty as you are.”

“Huh?”

“You’re dripping blood.”

Azusa’s hair dripped with the blood of the zombie-like man who was beheaded in front of her.

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“I’ll be done soon. Be patient until I’m finished,” he said and continued rubbing the blood off. Azusa nodded in response to the comment that didn’t give her any room to refuse. Once he finished wiping up most of the blood he picked her up.

“Uh? Hey? What are you doing now?!”

“...”

Azusa wildly swung her arms and kicked, but the man said nothing as he opened a nearby door and went inside with her in his arms. Once inside, he put her down.

“Come into the living room when you’re done. Don’t run away,” he warned gruffly and shut the door behind him. Azusa listened as his footsteps faded into the distance.

“This is...a bathroom?”

Azusa took in what was undeniably a large bathroom. There was a sink, toilet, and bathtub farther in the room. Clean bath towels and a dress sat on top of the washing machine in the bathroom.

“I guess he wants me to wash up?”

She grabbed one of the white towels and realized just how dirty she was when it reddened at her touch. Surprised, she walked in front of the sink mirror to check herself over.

“Wow, I look like a horror movie survivor.” She giggled at the insanity of it all.

Dirt and mud covered her from head to toe from the triple axel fall she took earlier in the forest. The mud was saturated with the blood spurted all over her by the beheaded zombie. Twigs and leaves were tangled in her knotted hair. If she were to sum her appearance up in one word, she was filthy. To put it in two words, she was extremely filthy. She couldn't help feeling pathetic when she realized the reason the man had such a puzzled frown on his face when they reunited in the forest was because of how unsightly she was.

"First, a shower."

Azusa didn't know who the man was or his name, but she decided to unreservedly take advantage of his generosity.

"**SORRY** for the wait?" Azusa said tilting her head a little.

Saying, "I'm done with my shower," or "Thanks for letting me shower first," didn't seem right considering the situation. So she went with a generic reply that still didn't sit well with her.

She had changed into the white dress placed on the washing machine and stood frozen in the doorway to the living room. She had no idea what to do next. She restlessly glanced around the room. The red-eyed man looked up from the book he was reading and gestured for her to sit on the couch across from his recliner. She entered the room and sat directly across from him.

"Um, thank you for letting me shower. And for the change of clothes," Azusa formally thanked him and bowed her head.

"You are welcome. Were you hurt anywhere?" he asked, nonchalantly picking up a cup of coffee from the table between them and taking a sip.

"No. I'm fine."

"I see." The man shut the book and faced Azusa. "Azusa Saito, why are you here? If I'm not mistaken, Ichi should be guarding you right now. Am I wrong?"

"You aren't wrong. Um...well..."

Here it is! I knew I'd get asked this question! Cold sweat trickled down Azusa's back as she got the feeling her treatment from now on would depend on how she answered this question. She doubted he would believe her if she told him a blue butterfly told her that her father was being judged at a court of inquiry or that she fell into a forest when she opened a door in the kitchen. While she didn't think he would believe her story, she couldn't come up with a good lie either.

"Um, you may not believe me, but..." Azusa decided to tell him everything that happened, without lying about any of it. She would

just have to think of how to handle the situation differently when he didn't believe her.

“**THAT** was a trap set for you by the Blues,” the man stated matter-of-factly.

Azusa had a hunch that was the case. She had gradually regained her cool during her shower and started thinking everything was a scheme set up by the Blue Coven she kept hearing about.

“They probably found a way to control the F to make it capture you.”

“That was an F?” The pieces seemed to be coming together. But there was one more thing she still had to make clear. “Um, is my dad going to be judged at a court of inquiry?”

“...What will you do when you know the answer?” The man's answer practically affirmed her suspicion.

Azusa slammed her hands on the table and leaned forward. “What is going to happen to my dad?!”

“That isn't something we get to decide. His sentence will be determined by the Red Coven's Patriarch and the council at the court of inquiry.”

“It's possible for him to be killed then?”

“It's not unlikely.”

“...!” Azusa stood to run out of the room. He grabbed her arm to stop her.

“What can you do by going there? Do you even know where court is being held?”

“I'll look for it!”

“Do you think I'd let you go? We'd be the ones inconvenienced if you put yourself in the same position again. Besides, aren't you scared there's a chance you might face another F?”

“I'm not scared!” Azusa lied.

Her legs felt like jelly when she remembered being nearly bitten by the zombie. But she was far more scared of losing her father.

“He's the only family I have!” she yelled. He still wouldn't let go of her arm.

“.....”

“.....”

Time passed slowly as they glared at each other in silence. Neither of them showed any signs of backing down.

“Then would it be okay if you came with me?” Azusa asked, breaking the silence.

“Huh?”

“You guys are scared I’ll leave your protection and fall into the Blue Coven’s hands, right? In that case, please show me the way there! You know where they are holding the court of inquiry.” They continued glaring. “Am I wrong?”

“I can avoid the trouble of doing that by stopping you with force.”

“I will just keep running away. Wouldn’t it be less trouble to show me the way this once than having to keep recapturing me every time?”

Azusa knew full-well if she were caught here, she would never be able to run away again. They would strengthen their security. Not to mention the only reason she got away was because the Blue Coven set everything up for her—she couldn’t have escaped on her own. Even so, she flashed a fearless smile at him.

“What are you going to do at the court of inquiry? You have no right or power to determine what his sentence will be.”

“You can look forward to what I have in mind. I believe I will put on a good show for you,” she bluffed. She had a general idea of what she would do at the court of inquiry, but the likelihood of it succeeding was unknown.

The man stared at her in silence. Several seconds later he sighed in resignation. “Get ready to go. We’ll leave in ten minutes.”

“Thank you!” Azusa gripped the man’s hand and swung it up and down. For a moment her attitude made him do a double take, but his expressionless mask quickly returned.

“Please show me the way there! Um...Mr. Red-eyes?”

“...It’s Kouya. Kouya Doumeki.”

“Kouya! Please wait a few minutes. I’ll get ready right away!”

Kouya watched Azusa happily run off to get ready with an unreadable expression.

Chapter 9: The Reason Behind a Warm Welcome

AZUSA honestly had her doubts. She couldn't deny this method of travel was easy on her, fast, and lessened the possibility of getting attacked. Her view was incredible and it mitigated the chance of getting lost. Or rather, there was no road to get lost on in the first place. But traveling like this was unbearably embarrassing and terrifying.

"Say, Kouya, can you put me down?"

"You don't have any shoes, right?"

"I can make do with the sandals you let me borrow."

"Can you fly on your own?"

"I'm sorry, I cannot fly."

Azusa was currently flying through the sky—held in Kouya's arms like a princess. A black mist had hardened into wings on Kouya's back. They had formed on his back without ripping his clothes. According to him, he had created the wings from the vampire vestiges he had collected over the years, but she didn't understand what that meant in the slightest. Apparently, he was capable of changing the makeup of his body to grow wings, but he wasn't fond of the way that option ripped his clothes.

"We can land and walk there, but this is the fastest way to get where you want to go."

"...Please take me there this way then."

Azusa's best option was to rely on him—some discomfort was necessary to achieve her goal. Obviously, it would be better to make it in time for the court of inquiry rather than miss it altogether. She didn't have a watch, but the sky was dark. It was already nighttime.

"Where are they holding court anyway?"

"At the Patriarch's manor. They hold other meetings there at the same time."

"Dad will be there too?"

"It's just a court of inquiry in name—the person being judged won't be present. His punishment will be determined based on circumstances and evidence."

"He can't even defend himself then!" Azusa shouted.

"Well, I'd expect they questioned him beforehand."

The situation is worse than I thought. I don't know what punishment they have in mind for him, but the word kill has come up more than once. The probability of that happening is high considering the difference in common sense between humans and vampires. Azusa stiffened at the conclusion she came to.



“Don’t worry. We’ll make it in time,” Kouya comforted.

She instinctively looked up at the sound of his voice and made eye contact with his ruby-red eyes set in a virile face. He quickly averted his eyes.

“Have your eyes always been this color, Kouya?” she asked curiously.

“Yeah, they have,” he answered curtly, his tone stiffer than earlier. Azusa didn’t notice the change.

“I knew it! I thought they might be because your eyes stayed red. When Subaru showed me his red eyes after drinking, they returned to their prior green minutes later.”

“I see.”

“Your eyes are so pretty. They stand out somewhat, but are like rubies,” she complimented.

“.....” Kouya blinked several times and turned his face toward Azusa. He had a baffled expression on his face.

“You think so?”

“I do!”

“...Really?”

“Yes.”

They both fell silent after that. Kouya returned his gaze to the sky in front of him, the expression fading from his face. Azusa was starting to get uncomfortable and restless from the silence.

“Is something wrong with your sensibilities?” Kouya broke the silence.

“What? Mine?”

He was the first person to question her sensibilities. Not many people would ask that as a normal question without any contempt or mockery like he had.

“No, no one has ever said that to me before. Why do you ask?”

“...Never mind. Don’t worry about it.”

“Why?” Azusa tilted her head in confusion just as her body started to float. She instinctively tightened her arms around Kouya’s neck. He had begun descending toward land.

“We’re here,” Kouya announced and landed in the entryway to a large Japanese-style manor set on a vast plot of land surrounded by Japanese rock and moss gardens. The doorplate read, ‘Doumeki’. Azusa looked at Kouya.

“Can I ask what your last name is again, Kouya?”

“Doumeki,” he stated matter-of-factly, without a change in expression. Azusa’s facial muscles, on the other hand, were twitching.

“Kouya, is this possibly your—”

“My dad’s house.”

“In other words, your father is—”

“The current Patriarch of the Red Coven,” he affirmed. Not an ounce of regret or guilt colored his expressionless face.

Azusa couldn't stop from screaming, “You gotta be freakin' kidding me!”

TIME passed quickly after their unexpected arrival. Two maids appeared several seconds after Azusa's shout and invited them inside the manor. They led her to a separate room and abruptly helped her change clothes. Unable to keep up with the sudden development, she let them do whatever they wanted to her and by the time she realized it—

“Is this a kimono? It looks like a pricey one,” she commented.

“Yes, it is! You look splendid in it!” complimented one of the maids who had helped her change into a peach-colored kimono.

The golden phoenix design started at her ankles and looked as if it were about to soar off the clothes, giving every impression she was wearing a very expensive kimono.

Azusa was disheartened. In her imagined scenario, she was supposed to barge in on the secretly held court of inquiry, lay out her terms, and rescue her father.

But reality had her warmly welcomed at the front door and changed into a gorgeous and expensive kimono. She would understand if Kouya was warmly welcomed by the household servants, since he was none other than the son of their master. But she couldn't fathom why they would welcome some girl they didn't know.

“However, I must say it is a dream come true to learn Master Kouya is finally establishing a contract with someone! I have had the honor of caring for him since he was a wee little thing and this is a first for him! What happened to his dear mother and older brother is unfortunate, but I am overjoyed to see he has decided to live despite it. This humble maid Kuki is Master Kouya's ally no matter what others may say about him!” exclaimed the fifty-something year old woman who had helped Azusa change.

Her hair was beautifully done up with a traditional Japanese cloth. Her characteristically dignified beauty must have made her quite popular in her youth, but her personality seemed flawed. She placed both hands on her cheeks and leaned back with a jovial look on her face. Azusa couldn't help being curious about why the woman named Kuki was so happy. She got the sense some sort of grave misunderstanding was going on.

“Excuse me, Ms. Kuki? Where is Kouya?”

“Oh, how horrible of me! Of course you want to show off to him

right away, I see! I shall go call for him now!" Kuki exclaimed and slipped out of the room.

Kouya came into the room several minutes later.

"What do you think, Master Kouya? Isn't Miss Azusa most beautiful?"

"...Yeah, she is." Kouya winced a little from Kuki's overwhelming excitement. She snatched up Kouya's hand and forcefully pulled him to stand beside Azusa.

"You look adorable together!"

"....."

"Kouya! What is the meaning of this? Why am I being welcomed with open arms?" Azusa asked in such a quiet whisper, she wondered if he heard her. He tilted his head in contemplation too. Apparently, he hadn't caught onto what was going on yet either.

"I was stunned when Master Kouya suddenly declared, 'I'm going to introduce her to Dad,' but seeing as you came to introduce your partner before establishing a contract, the gap between you and Master Akashi must be gradually closing! Your humble maid Kuki is deeply moved!"

Kouya frowned in confusion. Azusa didn't know what Kuki meant by contract and asked him about it in a whisper, but he ignored her entirely.

"...Contract?"

"Oh dear, I thought that was the case because Master Kouya brought a woman to the manor. Was I mistaken?"

"....."

"Master Kouya?"

"...You're right."

Hey! You just agreed because it's too much of a pain to tell the truth! You thought it was too annoying to turn down so you're going with the flow! Get a grip on the situation, Kouya! Azusa watched their exchange while panicking internally.

However, Kuki gave Azusa such a warm reception because she misunderstood her to be Kouya's *contract* partner. If Azusa was honest with herself, being misunderstood was better than being chased out of the manor.

"That is how it should be! I knew it was true! In that case, Master Kouya, Miss Azusa, please wait here while I prepare Master Akashi for your arrival." Kuki left the room in high spirits, thoroughly satisfied by Kouya's response.

Once Kuki left the room, Azusa grabbed Kouya by the collar. "Kouya! What is a contract?! Why am I being welcomed with open arms?! And why did you keep quiet about being the Patriarch's son?! Please give me an explanation I can accept!"

“Calm down.”

“If there is someone who can be calm in this situation, I’d like to meet them!”

“Pipe down. Others can hear you.”

“...Geh.” Azusa grudgingly let go of his shirt collar. It must have hurt a little, because Kouya pulled his shirt away from his throat and cleared it.

“Contract refers to the contract we make when we agree to drink each other’s blood as equals. It’s an arrangement established so vampires won’t carelessly attack people. Those in a contract are forbidden from drinking anyone other than their partner’s blood. It’s fundamentally a contract exchanged between two vampires. Although there are exceptions.”

“Does that mean Ms. Kuki thought you came to report your contract with me to your father...Mr. Akashi?”

“Yeah.”

“Is contracting with someone a serious thing you formally report to your parents? Is there a problem with both parties just agreeing to drink each other’s blood and casually mentioning it?”

“.....” Kouya stayed silent with an awkward look on his face, as if he were contemplating whether he should explain or not. And then he dropped a bombshell, “A vampire contract has the same connotations as marriage. Well, the ability to contract with several people at once makes it different from marriage.”

“Huh? Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat?!” Azusa’s shocked scream echoed through the manor.

Chapter 10: A Compliant Guinea Pig

“**DID** something happen?!” Kuki shouted, frantically barging into the room after hearing Azusa’s scream. Her eyes locked on Azusa’s hands clamped on Kouya’s shoulders. Her eyes peeled back in surprise at the fury on Azusa’s face. “Miss Azusa! What are you doing?!”

Kouya held out his hand to stop Kuki from lunging at Azusa.

“It’s okay... Azusa was just frightened by a mouse she saw in the room. Nothing wrong here.” Kouya put his arm around Azusa’s back in feigned concern.

“Are you okay?”

“Y-Yes! I am! Thank you very much, Kouya.”

Th-That was dangerous! Cold sweat trickled down Azusa’s back. Everything would be over if she got found out here. Kuki put her hand on her chest in relief.

“Is that so? What a relief. This humble maid Kuki was prepared to tear off the limbs of any fool who dared to be offensive toward Master Kouya, even if they happened to be the very woman he chose to contract with! I am glad you were no fool, Miss Azusa,” Kuki said with a toothy grin, her canine teeth clearly longer and sharper than normal.

Chills trailed down Azusa’s back.

Oh yeah, Subaru said most of the people living in this town are vampires. I bet that means Kuki is one too! Her terrifying comment about tearing limbs off confirms it! This really is a town of vampires. It didn’t seem real because I haven’t walked outside the mansion grounds much, but I’m forced to believe it after coming across nothing but vampires since going outside for the first time today.

“Kuki, can you clear the area until the meeting with Father?”

“Yes, sir! Your wish is my command, Master Kouya! My utmost apologies for my lack of consideration. I remember what it was like to be young!”

“.....”

Kuki was under yet another grandiose misunderstanding. Azusa apologetically watched the furrow lines deepen on Kouya’s brow.

“I’m sorry,” Azusa apologized.

“What’s done is done.”

Kuki left the room like she was walking on air, leaving Kouya and Azusa behind to work things out.

“I was shocked when you said a contract is the same as marriage... I raised my voice without thinking... Sorry for making you tell all sorts of lies.”

“I said it’s done with already. I’ll clear up the stuff about the

contract after we finish what you came here to do. Don't worry."

"Thank you very much for taking care of everything for me," Azusa thanked him from the bottom of her heart. She knelt on the ground before him in a formal bow to express her gratitude.

Kouya poked her head and grumbled, "Yeah. Anyway, what do you plan on doing now?"

"There's only one thing to do—crash the court of inquiry and ruin their plans!"

"...While I was waiting for you to change, I heard the court of inquiry you plan on crashing is to be held the day after tomorrow. If you still want to burst in on them, I can speak on your behalf to let you stay here until then."

"Is there anyone I can meet with now?"

"You would only be able to meet my father. Well, the Patriarch holds all the power over the Red Coven. No matter how unreasonable the demand and how many voices rise up in protest, the nobles must follow what the Patriarch decides. In other words, your wish will come true if you can convince the Patriarch."

"Then I'll commence my plan when I meet him!" Azusa promptly decided.

"Okay."

If the Patriarch had the power to decide, going to the court of inquiry or meeting with him would render the same result.

"I'll absolutely get Dad's unconditional release!" Azusa exclaimed. Kouya felt a little worried watching her huff like a dragon ready for battle.

"I can do this!" Azusa stood in front of the Japanese sliding screen leading to the room where the Patriarch waited and slapped her cheeks. The brisk slap echoed through the lengthy hallway.

Shortly after Kuki left, she returned to show Kouya and Azusa to this room. Naturally, Azusa was to lead the way into the room—Kouya followed behind her. For some reason, his presence gave her courage.

Azusa checked under her kimono, *Good, I still have my sole weapon on me.*

"Excuse me! Can I come in?" she asked from outside the sliding door.

"Come in," answered someone from inside the room.

Azusa slid the door open the moment she was granted permission, revealing a spacious traditional Japanese room decorated with expensive-looking antique hanging-scrolls and katanas on the back wall. The room looked like what Azusa had seen in Yakuza

movies, adding to her initial thought the Patriarch would be a stern-looking middle-aged man.

However in the middle of the room sat—

“Welcome. I assume you are the girl Kouya is contracting with? ...Is what I planned on saying, but you’re...”

No matter the angle Azusa looked at him from, the man was clearly in his early thirties.

“Um, pardon me, where is the Patriarch? Is Kouya’s father, Mr. Akashi, not here right now?”

“I am Akashi Doumeki, the current Patriarch of the Red Coven. I am undeniably the person you are looking for, Azusa Saito.”

“You are?! But...”

He appeared young enough be Kouya’s older brother. His eyes, silky black hair, and straight nose were similar to Kouya’s, but Azusa had a hard time believing they were father and son.

“Kouya, you’re there, aren’t you? Azusa will be confused if you don’t explain to her.”

“...Vampires age at a much slower rate once they reach twenty. He might not look it, but the Patriarch is over 200 years old. The stronger the vampire, the longer their lifespan,” Kouya explained to Azusa after reluctantly coming out of the shadows. His voice was stiff.

Azusa’s eyes widened, “Then you are really the Patriarch?”

“Hello, Azusa. I know about you. My condolences for your unfortunate kidnapping. Now then, why are you here? I assume you are not actually here because you are going to establish a contract with Kouya, no? I feel bad for Kuki,” Akashi smiled as if to say he knew everything. He rested his elbows on the table and looked as if he were testing her.

Azusa caught her breath. Akashi’s expression may have appeared gentle, but the aura coming from him screamed he was the powerful vampire in charge of the rest of the vampires around here. The game was about to begin.

“Allow me to get straight to the point! Please release my father. I want his unconditional release where he will not be judged or punished for any crimes!”

“Is it all right for me to assume the man you refer to as father is the researcher who kidnapped you without permission? If I am not mistaken, his name is Shinji Saito.”

“Yes. You are right. Can you do that for me?”

“Impossible,” Akashi asserted. His one word seemed to freeze the air in the room. “Could you ask the same of us for a criminal who stole millions or even billions of yen worth of goods? You cost us about that much. You want us to acquit him of that grave crime... Don’t you see the unfeasibility of your demand?” Akashi’s expression

and tone were kind, but his smile didn't reach his eyes. He wasn't angry, but studying her.

Azusa carefully picked her next words, "Is it impossible?"

"Impossible."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what."

"In that case, I have my own idea of how to make it possible," Azusa said and pulled a paring knife from under her kimono. Akashi's expression faltered for the first time.

"Oh?" he uttered a little surprised. "Are you going to threaten me with that knife? Unfortunately, your knife will never reach me. I may not look the role, but I am the man who rules over the entire Red Coven. I'll rip off all five limbs before you can swing the knife."

"...I am sure you will," Azusa commented and calmly held the knife to her throat. The knife cut into her flesh. Blood dripped onto her arm. Kouya gasped in shock behind her. "At this distance, I will be able to slit my throat faster than you can stop me, right? Now then, let's negotiate, Mr. Akashi."

"...You're an interesting girl," Akashi chuckled like he was genuinely amused.

"Please release my father."

"Your threat is that you will kill yourself if I don't accept your terms? You aren't that important to us. You shouldn't overestimate your own value, child."

"Lies! If that were true, you wouldn't have sheltered me in the mansion with bodyguards! If all you wanted was to prevent me from being captured by the Blue Coven, you would have killed me the moment I was in your possession, right? But you guys didn't do that. All because you want to know more about me as a resource for your 'research to become human'... Am I wrong?"

"...I guess you are a smarter girl than the reports let on. Our research to become human is just one small piece of our greater research to 'preserve our species'. Our hopes for you span to a resource for more extensive research. Even so, your death won't adversely hinder our research. You were somehow able to run away this time, but I have ordered your bodyguard Ichi to kill you if you attempt to run away too many times. Whether you are alive or not doesn't matter much to us."

"Regardless of what you just said, don't you believe when it comes down to having a *living guinea pig* or a *dead guinea pig*, a living guinea pig has more value?"

"Are you saying you will become a *compliant guinea pig*?"

"No, I will not be compliant! I will fight you to the best of my ability! In return, I won't run away!"

“Oh?”

“I will resist! But I won’t run away either! I will not leave this town of my own volition! You can do whatever you want! Chasing me, capturing me, and vivisection is all up to your own discretion! Go ahead and continue your research!” Azusa looked straight into Akashi’s eyes. She glared to keep from losing to his overwhelming aura.

“In other words, in return for promising the unconditional release of Shinji Saito, you will live the rest of your days here as a guinea pig. Did I understand you correctly?”

“Yes. I will fight you though!” Azusa repeated. She said everything she came to say. She felt sweat gushing from all her pores. Akashi looked genuinely taken by surprise. He smiled broadly and started laughing aloud.

“All right. I will acquit Shinji Saito! And as token of kindness for your bravery, I will allow him to live with you in the mansion you are confined to. You are a good girl who has an immense love for her parents. It appears there is much I need to learn from your father on how to raise children.”

“Th-Thank you very much!” Relief swept through her body, zapping her of strength and causing her knees to buckle. Kouya wrapped his arm around her waist to support her as she was about to fall backward. He looked like he couldn’t accept what just happened, but he nodded when their eyes met.

“I don’t know why you ran away Azusa, but I presume the Blue Coven was involved. Kouya, you brought her here; you are responsible for guarding her from now on. You can let Ichi continue to watch over her when she bathes, changes, and sleeps, but you are responsible for everything else. You will stay in the same mansion in a separate room. Understand?”

“...Understood,” Kouya nodded unhappily. Azusa felt sorry for him. She really caused him nothing but trouble.

“One more thing, Azusa. As long as you do not break your promise to me, I will guarantee your safety in this town. I cannot allow you to be alone for obvious reasons, but I don’t mind if you freely walk around town with Kouya. Naturally, I don’t have to say what will happen if you...go against your word.”

“I won’t! Thank you very much!”

“No need for thanks. This is the result of your actions. You can be proud. Also, you said we can dissect you alive, but we don’t have the desire to do so yet. We are curious what changes your body will go through on your way to adulthood. Your blood is the Ancient’s, but your body is human. We don’t even know if you will age normally or at a slower rate like we do. As such, I believe over the next five to six

years we won't take any heavy-handed measures such as vivisection. I personally don't want to do anything like that after six years either, but it will depend on the situation, making it something I cannot promise you at this point. But I will endeavor to avoid such a thing."

Akashi smiled at Azusa, completely changing the aura he gave off earlier—now he actually seemed like just a nice man. Azusa was relieved.

"I am fond of personalities like yours. To the point I would be thrilled if you established a contract with Kouya for real."

"I will not!" Azusa flatly declined, the concept of contracting being the same as marriage nagging at the back of her mind.

Chapter 11: You From the Distant Past

FOUND her.

Kouya quietly hid behind a large tree, his eyes locked on a young girl playing in the park. The girl had flaxen hair and large chestnut brown eyes—in all likelihood she was the target. Kouya compared a picture of the woman the Blue Coven scumbags had kidnapped and experimented on without permission with the little girl.

Azusa Saito. Age 4.

Alias: Snow White.

A young girl created with the blood of the Ancient.

The girl in his report kicked a pink ball to one of her friends.

This is a story that took place thirteen years before Azusa was kidnapped.

THE day was unbearably hot, as though nature sought to convey the coming summer. The young man hid his characteristic red eyes behind contact lenses and donned a short sleeve shirt and casual slacks. His slightly longer-than-normal hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail. No matter how you looked at him, he was a normal human. However, he was actually a vampire.

Kouya Doumeki—he appeared to be in his early-twenties. Kouya had been moving around the past several months on orders he received from his father Akashi, Patriarch of the Red Coven.

His orders were:

“Find the girl with the blood of the Ancient before the Blue Coven and take her into custody. Capture the man with her—Shinji Saito—dead or alive.”

“Take her into custody? Who are they kidding? This is more of a kidnapping,” Kouya grumbled to himself, recalling his orders.

The search began the day after Yayoi and Shinji vanished, but several years passed without finding them. The Red Coven Patriarch grew impatient and selected his own son, who he took pride in being the strongest of all the vampires in his coven, to take over the search. He made the right choice—Kouya finally grasped the whereabouts of Shinji Saito, the man who had disappeared with the girl’s mother. He also determined the girl was living with him.

Guess I should report back soon.

Kouya hadn't reported their whereabouts to Akashi yet. Having no definite proof Azusa truly possessed the blood of the Ancient was one factor, but the main reason he hadn't was because he had reservations about destroying her peaceful life and entrusting her to the two-faced cunning devil he called father. But not reporting back and leaving her be could lead to a far more miserable future at the hands of the Blue Coven.

Kouya had investigated the Saito household a few days earlier to discover she dearly loved Shinji Saito as a father. They lived with Yayoi who she considered her mother as well. The family of three got along very well. He couldn't bring himself to destroy their family. But that was possibly an inevitable sacrifice for her future safety.

"Oh, hey, Mister! Please get my ball!" a girl called out just as a pink vinyl ball bounced at his feet. Azusa Saito ran over to him as fast as her little legs would take her.

Shoot, I didn't plan on letting her see me, he thought, but it was too late for regrets.

"Thank you very much!" Azusa bowed her head after he threw the ball to her. She turned around to run back to her friends, but tripped over a root and fell magnificently on her face.

"Gah!" she cried out in a weird voice.

"...Are you okay?"

Is she going to cry? What should I do if she does? Kouya was at his wits' end on how to handle a crying child. Azusa suddenly popped up off the ground and flashed an angelic smile at him.

"I'm okay!"

"I see..."

Noticing the fair amount of blood oozing from her knee, Kouya stopped her from running back to her friends. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it around her knee. Azusa patiently let him tend to her.

"Have your dad look at it when you get home. He's a doctor, right?"

"Why do you know that, Mister?"

"...I heard about it from someone," Kouya answered—not like he could honestly admit he found out during his investigation to kidnap her.

"Cool! Daddy's famous!" Azusa grinned happily. Kouya's heart stung at her innocent smile. "Thanks, Mister!"

He felt a little guilty watching her run toward her friends. He quietly decided to abduct her in a week's time, internally apologizing for the crime he had yet to commit.

Chapter 12: Lucky Clover

“**MISTER!** Come out! Mister who helped my booboo!”

“.....”

How did it come to this? Kouya wanted to put his hand to his head to stop the oncoming headache.

Azusa Saito—his target was calling for him. Calling for him in the middle of the park in a loud enough voice the neighboring houses could hear.

This is bad. Really bad.

It was the day after he had decided to abduct her in a week’s time.

“Mister with pretty black hair! Mist—”

“Hey, I’m begging you, please quit that.”

“Mister!” Azusa ran over to Kouya when he showed himself. Her face brightened with a broad smile. “I thought you would appear if I called for you here!”

“You didn’t think I wouldn’t appear? It’s not like I’m always here.”

“But you came out, didn’t you?”

“...I did,” Kouya sighed.

She grinned and held out his washed handkerchief. “Thank you very much for yesterday!”

Her parents must have told her to say that to the person who lent it to her, because her expression filled with the satisfaction of successfully completing her mission.

“You are welcome.”

You could have thrown it away, he thought, but quietly pocketed the handkerchief—something fluttered out of the folds as he did.

“Oh yeah! I was thinking of giving that to you, Mister!”

“A four-leaf clover?” Kouya picked up the clover from the ground.

“I found two four-leaf clovers when I searched after playing yesterday! One for Mommy! One for Mister! Did you know good things happen when you have a four-leaf clover on you?”

“...I don’t need it. Give it to your dad,” Kouya said trying to return the clover, but Azusa quickly pushed his hand back.

“Take it! It’s my thanks for yesterday! You look like you have poor health after all, Mister!”

“I’m healthy.”

Vampires possessed skin whiter than humans, but this was Kouya’s first time being called sickly because of it.

“It’s fine, it’s fine! I’ll search for Daddy’s today! I need to search

for more for Mommy too!”

“Do you look for them every day?”

“Yup! Mommy’s sick, so I want her to get well soon. Daddy said she should actually be in the hospital! But then he said we can’t bring her there. I wonder why.”

“.....”

He’s probably trying to keep them hidden from vampires.

The majority of vampires living in Japan were from the Red, Blue, and Yellow Covens, all of which had created their own towns, but there were always exceptions. Vampires were capable of living similar lives to humans. It wasn’t unusual for there to be some who chose to live among humans.

Her parents, Shinji and Yayoi, were likely scared of being discovered by vampires. Escape would be far harder if Yayoi were hospitalized.

“Is your mom’s condition bad?” Kouya asked before he realized it. Azusa’s bright smile disappeared.

“Yeah. She won’t eat much. She only eats about half of what I do. I’m gathering four-leaf clovers to help her get well soon!”

“I see. I hope she recovers.”

“Yeah! Okay, I’m going to go look for more! You take care of yourself too, Mister!”

“I will.”

I’m healthy though, Kouya thought, but he couldn’t say that to the small back running away from him. He watched her leave before looking down at his feet to find a four-leaf clover. He glanced at his hand thinking he dropped the one she had given him, but it was still there. On closer look, the one he spotted was growing out of the ground. He picked it and carefully wrapped it in the handkerchief.

“Guess I can give it to her tomorrow.”

He imagined Azusa’s beaming smile. Without realizing it, Kouya’s face had softened into a smile.

“UM...one, two, three. This one has three leaves. So does this one. And this one.”

“Is this what you’re looking for?”

Sure enough, Azusa appeared in the park the next day too. Once again she was diligently searching for four-leaf clovers. Kouya stood behind her and held out the four-leaf clover he picked the day before.

“Mister!”

“Mm-hm.”

“Isn’t this the one I gave you yesterday?”

"I have that one properly stored away here." Kouya pulled a paperback book from his pocket and opened it to show her. The clover was wrapped in a tissue between the pages.

"You dried it like a pressed flower?"

"Yeah. It's a special gift after all. As you can see, this clover is different from the one I picked yesterday."

"...You are really nice, Mister! Thanks!"

"It just happened to be growing at my feet."

"Not that! For drying the clover! I'm happy!" Azusa smiled cheerfully, thrilled more that he had pressed the clover she gave him to preserve it over the fact he gave her a new one.

Unsure of how to react, Kouya placed the clover he picked in her hand and turned on his heel to leave.

"Mister! Are you leaving?"

"Yeah."

The next time we meet will be in five days. On the day I abduct you.

"Wait! Why don't we chat, Mister?" Azusa grabbed Kouya's sleeve, stopping him from walking away.

"I don't have anything to talk to you about though?"

"I do!"

"...What is it?"

"Can you make a flower crown?"

"Huh?" he grunted in a weird voice and furrowed his brow.

Azusa rattled on, unaffected by his evident displeasure, "Tomorrow's tomorrow is Mommy's birthday! I want to give her a flower crown as a present!"

"Tomorrow's tomorrow? You mean the day after tomorrow? So? What do you want from me?"

"Teach me how to make a flower crown!"

She must have thought he could make a flower crown because he knew how to press flowers. Her face filled with hopeful anticipation. But Kouya not only didn't feel like meeting her expectations, he also didn't know how—even if he wanted to.

"...Sadly, I don't know how to make a flower crown. Can't you ask your dad or mom?"

"I can't! It's a secret! I'm going to make it in secret and surprise them!"

"I don't know how. Ask someone else."

"...Sniffle."

"....."

"....."

Azusa's big chestnut-brown eyes wavered with unshed tears. Kouya tried to swallow the lump in his throat. Not knowing the best thing to do, his head started spinning. He always had a hard time

handling woman and children, especially when they cried.

“...Can I go and look up how to do it and come back with the information by tomorrow?”

“Yeah! Thanks, Mister! I looove you!”

“.....”

Was I just tricked by a four-year-old? Kouya couldn't help thinking that after the 180 degree change in Azusa's expression. He could only sigh about it now.

“Let's meet up here after lunch tomorrow! No napping through it, Mister! I'll do my best to make it through without napping too!”

“Okay.” He promised and told himself this would be the last promise he would make her. He needed to put distance between them if he was going to abduct her in five days—for both of their sakes.

But he couldn't keep his promise with her.

Azusa didn't show up the next day or the day after that.

Chapter 13: Tears of a Lonely Bunny

YAYOI had died.

A gaggle of neighbors clad in black entered the Saito household amid the downpour. Azusa stood outside the house with sorrowful eyes. She stared at the palm of her hand not grasping her little red umbrella. A pile of four-leaf clovers rested on her hand. She squeezed them, her face twisting with grief, but no tears clouded her young eyes. The adults occasionally went into the backyard to check on her, all of whom she greeted with a stouthearted smile.

Kouya could only watch over her from afar as the rain quietly poured down on him.

DAYS later—the exact day he had decided to abduct Azusa arrived. But Kouya didn't have the drive to go through with it. Perhaps it was because he had gotten too involved with the target. He didn't want to do anything to further harm the young girl whose face already drooped with loneliness and loss.

He hadn't reported back on his discovery of her yet. As things stood, he could still disappear from her life and return to tell Akashi he couldn't find her. But what about what came after that? Vampires from the Blue Coven might come to kidnap her. In that case, it would still be safer for her to be with the Red Coven.

"Mister."

Kouya had been sitting pondering those things on a park bench when a tiny voice roused him from his thoughts. He looked up to see Azusa standing in front of him—she was smiling.

"I'm sorry for breaking my promise with you, Mister. I came here today to tell you that."

"Are you okay?" the words were out his mouth before he could stop himself.

Azusa thoughtfully considered his words before responding in a voice that had lost some of its usual cheer, "You know everything, don't you, Mister? ...Mommy turned into a star and is watching over me from the skies, so I have to happily live her share too!"

"Is that so?"

Every time the adults tried to cheer her up, she repeated the same statement with gusto. She believed she was staying strong for her mother's sake, forcing the impossible on her young self as a result.

"I cried when my mother died...I think. I let my feelings take

control and took it out on my surroundings. You're amazing for keeping it in."

"Yeah."

Kouya remembered the days surrounding his mother's death. It happened before he had awakened as a vampire—a long time ago—but he still vividly remembered every detail. He knew the pain of losing a parent who actually loved you.

"But is there really any point in being amazing at a time like this?"

"Mm-hm."

"You can cry, you know?"

"Mm-hm."

Azusa's shoulders trembled, her eyes downcast. She frantically rubbed at her eyes, attempting to keep the tears at bay.

"I can't. I feel like if I cry, I'll really never see Mommy again."

She put both hands over her face as if she were desperately trying to push the tears back inside. But tears trickled from the corner of her eyes. Kouya pat her on the head—that was enough. Azusa dropped her hands from her face and sobbed. Large teardrop after large tear drop spilled down her cheeks. She cried in the grand way only a child cries.

KOUYA truly felt relieved no one else was in the park. By all appearances, it looked like a grown man made a little girl cry. He hadn't thought much of it at the time, but it might have gotten him reported to the police if the wrong person saw them. After crying for about an hour, Azusa's eyes were swollen and red, but she had a refreshed look about her.

"Your Mommy became a star too, Mister? When do you stop being sad? Can you forget that Mommy died? How was it for you?" Azusa asked, sitting on the bench beside him.

"I haven't forgotten her, and I'm still sad when I remember, but time will dull most of the pain."

"It will?"

"It will."

"I see," Azusa smiled—not the forced smile she greeted him with earlier, but an exuberant smile. He had successfully convinced her. "You really are nice, Mister...right?"

"Hm?"

Her face stiffened when she peered at his face. "They're red? Your eyes?"

"...!" Kouya's hand shot up to block his eyes as he scouted to the

other end of the bench to put distance between them. His contact lenses must have fallen out somewhere. He hadn't noticed.

Azusa, whose expression stiffened in surprise at the red color, scooted right up to him, even closer than they were sitting before. "They're so pretty! Your eyes are pretty, Mister!"

"...Huh?" Kouya was taken by surprise; he honestly thought she would break down crying in fear.

He was the first vampire since their ancestors to have eyes that stayed red without drinking blood. It was evidence of his great power and strong vampiric blood. But possessing these eyes made him a target of envy and contempt since birth. Even vampires from his same coven loathed and dreaded his eyes. If vampires feared him, humans were even worse—the majority of people were paralyzed with fear.

Naturally, Kouya believed Azusa would react the same way, but the girl in front of him gazed up at him with a sparkle in her eyes as she eagerly tried to get a glimpse of his eyes through the hand covering them.

"Quit it."

"They're like jewels! Your eyes are jewels! Like rubies!"

"....."

Kouya became worried about the girl's sensibilities. His eyes were always mocked for one reason or the other, but she was the first to say they looked like rubies. He hoped she would become more sensible as an adult.

"Did you cry a lot too, Mister? Is that why they're so red? Did you know that bunnies' eyes are red because they cried lots and lots from loneliness? Is that what happened to yours?"

"...That's right," Kouya went along with her story, unsure of how to explain his eyes if he denied it.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"My eyes have gotten a little red too, so I wonder if they'll become like yours if I cry more." Azusa pulled a hand-mirror out of her pocket to check her bloodshot eyes.

Kouya found himself oddly impressed that a four-year-old carried a mirror on her—that part of her made her no different from the other girls.

"I don't recommend it."

"You didn't have a daddy, Mister?"

"...I didn't."

To be precise, he had Akashi, but since he was little he had interacted with Akashi as the Patriarch more than he did as a father. Akashi would come to visit Kouya's mother, one of his many concubines, once a month as a father. Their relationship was far from

a normal father-son relationship.

"That's it then! You must have been lonely! Good boy. Good boy."

"....." Kouya froze, uncertain of what to do with the four-year-old who suddenly patted him on the head.

"I think my eyes would have been bright-red too if Daddy wasn't around. Daddy hugged me for hours after Mommy's death. My eyes will definitely be as red as yours if Daddy goes away too!"

"...You don't want to be away from your dad?"

"Yeah! I think I'd have a hard time because my eyes would be so red if Daddy went away too!"

"I see. That would be rough."

Kouya finally decided what he was going to do after hearing her answer—he wasn't going to abduct Azusa. Not yet at least.

He stood from the bench. If he was going to plan on how to deal with the Blue Coven, who would eventually come for her, he needed to look for someone to secretly watch over her.

"I just remembered I have something to do, so I'm going. Go home before it gets too dark."

"Okay! See you next time, Mister!"

"...Yeah."

We may never meet again. I hope we don't. That hope stopped him from returning her greeting.

Thirteen years later—his hopes were dashed when they reunited.

Chapter 14: Outing

“OH, what do we have here? Could it be you’re excited, Kou? You get to go on a date with Azusa after all.”

“.....”

Subaru had a smug look as he peeked in on Kouya getting dressed in one of the mansion rooms. Kouya was momentarily surprised by his stealthy entrance into the room, but the expression swiftly faded from his face.

THUD! Kouya karate-chopped Subaru’s face.

“Why don’t you try at least saying good morning like a normal person?” he scolded with a grimace.

Subaru rubbed his nose, apparently still in a good mood. “You’re a jerk for hitting me out of the blue, Kou. That hurt.”

“I made it hurt. Don’t say something so obvious.”

“Looks like you’ve gotten relatively used to life here. You’ve been here for a week so far. How’s it been? Are you getting along with Azusa?”

Subaru’s question reminded Kouya of what took place a week ago.

After Azusa confronted Akashi and won Shinji’s acquittal, Kouya escorted her back to the mansion to come face to face with Ichi and Subaru freaking out over her disappearance. They explained everything that happened, followed by Kouya informing them that he was on guard duty now too. To which Ichi bellowed in disgust, “Just what is Master Akashi thinking putting a man as a young woman’s primary bodyguard!”

He could still vividly recall the contempt in her voice.

“How’s it going, Kou?” Subaru repeated, “Are you getting along?”

Kouya hesitated before answering, “...Yeah, no problems here.”

“**KOUYA** is formidable,” Azusa muttered to her reflection. Her face somehow looked worn-out in the mirror. Ichi sat in a chair behind her, her lips pursed in dissatisfaction.

“Is there even a reason for you and that sourpuss of a man to get along in the first place?”

“I rather be on friendly terms than not. We’re stuck together all day, EVERY day, you know?”

“I know that, but still...”

Kouya was with her at all times over the past week. They were always together, from the time she woke up in the morning and crawled into bed at night—the only exceptions were when she bathed and actually slept. There was barely any conversation between them either.

Even if she started a conversation with Kouya, he would never let the conversation last or start one with her. He merely watched over her in silence when she jogged, baked, cleaned, and did anything else for that matter. Such was the state of things between them. It was very hard to say they were getting along.

“He only stoically stares at me in silence twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week! Could you stand that, Ichi?”

“When you put it that way, the situation certainly sounds unbearable.”

“Right? It would be different if I could talk with him like I do with you... Seriously, if I don’t do something about this soon, it’s going to burn a hole in my stomach.”

The more agonizing the time spent with Kouya became, the more the bath and sleep time Azusa spent with Ichi became like paradise. It was partially because they were both women, which made it far easier to hold a conversation. The relationship between them had subtly changed as they became more relaxed with each other. Now they treated each other more like friends than bodyguard and prisoner.

“I wish I could be with you during the day too, but Master Akashi decided otherwise...”

“Thank you, Ichi. I plan on doing my best to put an end to this situation! Cheer me on!” Azusa raised her fists in the air to pump herself up—she was full of motivation. “I dub my plan, ‘The Epic Strategy to Chat with Kouya!’”

“Exactly what you plan on doing, I see. All things considered, you jumped right to taking drastic measures. I can’t believe you are going out with Kouya.”

“I might find something to talk about if there’s a change in environment! Plus, I wanted to check the town out too!”

Azusa remembered the look on Kouya’s face when she asked if he would go to town with her. He agreed to go even though his face looked like he deeply detested the idea. She got the sense he internally categorized her as an *annoying woman*. She didn’t like that.

“Time to remove the annoying woman label!”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Ichi asked with a wry smile. She suddenly shifted to a more serious aura and faced Azusa. “I won’t try to talk you out of it when this is something you have decided on your own and Master Akashi has granted you permission, but I cannot recommend going into town with Kouya.”

“Why?”

“You might make some bad memories today. Please be careful.”

“Bad memories?”

“Oh, Kouya is here,” Ichi said, cutting off Azusa’s question.

The bedroom door opened and in came Subaru. Behind him was Kouya, his eyes black instead of red.

Chapter 15: An Unbridgeable Distance

AZUSA mulled over how to break the deadlock between them.

“Kouya, won’t you walk with me?”

“I’m good. No problem doing it this way.”

Azusa couldn’t hold in her sigh. She planned this outing to get to know him better and this was the result. She was alone in the center of downtown. Or more accurately, it was her and an animal. A black cat sat at her feet and meowed adorably at her.

Everything went smoothly until they departed the mansion grounds. The mansion sat on a tall hill a fair distance away from town and was surrounded by verdant trees like it was in the center of a forest. The distance between town and the mansion required a car. Kouya stayed with Azusa until they got out of the car at the town entrance and handed her a black cat he pulled from who knows where.

“I captured this guy yesterday for today. You just need to tell him if anything happens,” Kouya had said and walked off before Azusa could stop him.

Now she was alone in a town of vampires with a black cat nudging her leg.

“Is this cat your familiar or something like that?” Azusa asked the cat.

“Something like that,” answered a deep manly voice unbefitting the adorable cat’s mouth.

“Where are you right now, Kouya?”

“I’m keeping within a half-mile radius of you. I can rush to your side in seconds at this distance. You’re safe, don’t worry.”

“.....”

He had no intention of joining her.

Sounds like he really has no intention of walking with me. I didn’t think he hated me so much he couldn’t stand being seen with me. Azusa hung her head. Looking back on all that had happened between them, she couldn’t deny the trouble she had caused him.

I guess it’s inevitable he hates me. He doesn’t categorize me as an ‘annoying woman’, but a ‘spiteful woman’. A sigh naturally escaped when she came to that conclusion. Azusa picked up the cat and rubbed her face against his back to alleviate the twinge of sadness. The cat’s fur smelled like sunlight.

“Hey, you’re blocking my field of view.”

“Be quiet. I give up. I will go for a walk alone! I will walk around with the kitty in my arms like this!”

“I don’t mind, but why are you in a foul mood?”

"I don't know why."

"What?"

Azusa pursed her lips and began her exploration of the town. It really looked like a normal town, with a residence area, downtown, and grocery stores that sold normal meat and vegetables. At first she thought she would find blood packs being sold, but there was nothing like that—it was no different from a normal town. No one would believe it was a town of vampires if they came across it.

"Is this really a vampire town?" she asked Kouya through the cat.

"Yeah. About eighty percent of the residents here are vampires. The last twenty percent is made up of human children born between a vampire and human couple, human spouses, human allies, and whatnot."

"So there are vampire children who don't become vampires?"

"The correct term for them is dhampir. Ability-wise they aren't too different from humans. They are physically stronger though."

"I see. Everyone here looks like a normal human."

"Our outer appearance isn't all too different after all."

Conversation flowed smoothly between them. Perhaps it was because they were discussing a specific topic that she felt like they were holding a real conversation for once. Her soured mood gradually faded.

"A normal person wouldn't notice anything if they happened to come here, huh?"

"Normal people almost never enter this area. This town isn't on any maps. Our accomplices that infiltrated the upper levels of government and public office alter the data concerning our location, family registers, and other related information to keep us concealed."

"I feel like I just heard something that would make conspiracy-theorists giggle with glee." She was depressed by the news. In other words, she was on a solitary island cut off from the human world. She wanted to ask him how they acquired clothing, food, furniture, and other necessary items to survive, but she had a general idea of what the answer would be.

"A lot of vampires work in human cities to support this town, right?"

"Yeah, we couldn't do it without them."

I didn't know that. That basically means the old lady the next apartment over or my foul-mouthed landlord could have been vampires too.

"What do you plan on doing today?" Kouya questioned her through the cat.

“Ah, right, I was thinking of buying fruit to make a fruit tart for my dad who came home today!”

“Won’t the servants get it for you if you ask?”

“Fruit is one of those things you must pick out for yourself to find the perfect one!”

Color, size, shape, and sweetness all vary even when picking out the same kind of fruit. She wanted to choose her own fruit when she had the opportunity to.

Azusa looked over the map Ichi had drawn for her. She had Ichi tell her in advance which place sold the best fruit.

“According to this map, it should be beside the bookstore here—wait, there’s no bookstore.”

A large building was under construction where the bookstore should have been. She tilted her head thinking she got lost on the way.

“I think there used to be a bookstore here,” the cat said looking at the building under construction.

“Good to know! I wonder if they are making it a different kind of store,” Azusa marveled as she walked past the construction site. A man who looked human leisurely walked by with a steel beam resting on his shoulder.

“This really is a town of vampires.”

“I’ve been saying that since we got here.”

“I just got a real sense of that is all.” Azusa wondered if vampires had any need for heavy machinery. “Oh, it’s here! This is the place!”

“.....”

A small greengrocer was located on the other side of the construction site. Despite its small size, the front shelves were lined with an assortment of fruit.

A seemingly jovial and kindhearted older man called out to her as she examined the fruit, “Welcome, lass! Oh? ...I haven’t seen you around here before, have I?”

“Hello! Um, I am a human staying at Mr. Akashi’s place!” Azusa answered, remembering how insistent Subaru and Ichi were before she left about not revealing her circumstances. Her response was the one they had prepared for her in case anyone asked.

“Oh, I see, at Master Akashi’s place! This is a fine town. Enjoy your time here!” the owner smiled, flashing his pearly white fangs. Coupled with his mild-mannered looks, his attitude made him seem like a good person.

“Thank you very much.”

“What can I get for you today?”

“I was thinking of making a fruit tart. Do you have any strawberries? Also, white peaches. I don’t mind if you only have

canned. Please give me some of those oranges too!”

“Sure thing, lass! I’ll throw these in for free too!” the owner said, putting ripened red apples into the plastic bag with her other fruit.

“Thank you very much!”

Azusa happily showed the cat the apples and smiled, “Please look at this, Kouya! I got these for free! Don’t they look like your eyes?”

“.....”

The owner’s face stiffened at her comment. “Lass, did you just say *Kouya*? Are you referring to that cat? Could it be that cat is Master Akashi’s Kou—”

“Meow,” the cat interrupted him with a cute cry and jumped from Azusa’s arms onto the ground where it proceeded to lick itself. The owner sighed with relief.

“As if that’d be possible. Don’t startle me, lass. You went and made me think a cat was the Akaoni.”

“Akaoni?”

“Yup, Master Akashi’s second son. He’s the red-eyed vampire who doesn’t drink blood, which is why we call him Akaoni. You know, for the red ogres seen as the symbol of evil in Japanese legends? He’s infamous in this town. Well, he’s like an urban legend around here. It’s rumored no one has seen him in this town for close to twenty years.” The owner was talkative now that he was at ease.

“There were some who called him the red-eyed monster too. Some of the younger folk might not know of him, but everyone in my generation was scared to death of him. I mean, there are even rumors his strength is on par with Master Akashi’s! Well, if his power came with morals he would’ve made a fine Patriarch someday. Too bad he’s a kin killer. That’s the worst you can be, even for us.”

“Kin killer?”

“That monster went and killed his older brother! Master Akashi had mercy on him and didn’t dish out punishment for it though! Actually, rumor has it that the monster’s been entrusted with getting rid of the Fs now. The perfect job for a nasty monster that loves shedding his kin’s blood,” the owner declared in a huff, looking wholly satisfied by his gossip.

Azusa listened to him with a frown, not quite able to take in what he told her. “...Um, excuse me! I don’t think I’m going to buy this after all! I’m sorry!” she said abruptly, pushing the bag back to the owner.

“Why not, lass?”

“L-Look out below!”

Azusa looked up at the warning from above—her line of vision filled with the thick steel beam soaring down at her. Just past the beam she saw the pale look on a construction worker’s face. He likely

dropped it by accident. Azusa closed her eyes on the spur of the moment.

But the impact she was expecting never came.

“Are you all right?”

That’s right, he’s with me. Azusa remembered his presence when she heard the deep tenor of his voice. She opened her eyes to see Kouya standing beside her, his hand holding the steel beam over their heads. The force of the impact bent the steel beam around where Kouya’s hand had stopped it.

“AAAAAAAHHHHHHH!” the owner’s scream reverberated through the town the instant his eyes locked onto Kouya.

Chapter 16: Sumida Coffeehouse

KOUYA placed the steel beam on the ground and helped Azusa to her feet. He then turned to the frightened shopkeeper who had fallen on his butt and offered him his hand.

“Are you all right?”

“A-AKAONI!” The man shrieked in horror at the sight of Kouya’s hand moving toward him and scuttled backward. Cold sweat beaded his forehead and dripped onto his cheeks.

“I am occasionally mistaken for him, but I am not the Akaoni,” Kouya reassured, lifting the hair from his face to reveal dark yellow-brown eyes—the color of the contact lenses he had put on earlier.

The shopkeeper sighed with relief at the yellow-brown color of his eyes, not realizing they were merely contacts. He took Kouya’s hand this time and stood.

“C-Come on now, lad! Don’t scare me like that! I was seeing things because I was just talking about the Akaoni. Sorry for the misunderstanding!” the shopkeeper chuckled with embarrassment as he wiped sweaty hands on his smock.

“It happens often. Don’t concern yourself. If you will excuse me then. Someone is waiting for me. Goodbye.”

“Sure! Oh! Hey! Wait! Take this as an apology for mistaking you for some monster,” the shopkeeper said, stopping Kouya to hand him a paper bag full of fruit.

“...Are you sure?”

“Yeah! Sorry again! Also, thanks for saving this lass!”

“Thank you,” Kouya said with a light nod before leaving. He acted as a mild-mannered young man from when he arrived to his departure. The shopkeeper patted Azusa on the back as he watched Kouya leave.

“Isn’t it great that a good person passed by at the right time?”

“...Yes.”

“So, lassie, are you going to buy? Not going to?”

“I’m sorry, Mister! I need to go thank him!”

“What? Wait!”

Azusa chased after Kouya’s retreating figure without heeding the shopkeeper’s calls to stop. She ran down the main street at full speed. She caught up just as he was turning in to a side street. Azusa tugged on the back of his shirt with all her strength to stop him. He turned around with his usual expressionless face, but frowned upon seeing her.

“...Why did you follow me? Are you done shopping?”

“I’m done! It’s fine! Anyway, I wanted to—”

“Are you hungry?” Kouya asked, interrupting her. His question took her by surprise, but she gave a firm nod after a short pause—it was already past twelve.

“Come this way then,” Kouya said and proceeded down the side road without her.

“Ah, please wait for me!” Azusa frantically ran after him.

A coffee shop sat at the outskirts of the downtown area. The building was shaped like an acorn and the walls resembled mud walls. A closed sign rested on the finely carved wooden door.

‘Sumida Coffeehouse’ was neatly engraved on the cutely adorned signboard beside the door. Regardless of the closed sign, Kouya opened the coffeehouse door. Azusa tried to stop him, but he went inside anyway.

“Oh, Kou! You’re early! I was waiting for you. What’s it been? About half a year since you last stopped by?” asked a young man with blonde hair waiting inside the shop.

From appearances alone, he looked the same age as Kouya or a little older. He seemed about the same age as Subaru. All his hair was swept back and held in place by a headband. His clothes fit the image of a typical coffee shop employee, but...

Is it just me or is he flashy from the neck up? was Azusa’s first impression of the man.

“Ah, Kouya, we were waiting for you! Please sit wherever you like!”

A cheerful woman with her hair in a bob appeared next. The slightly oversized strawberry hairclip pinning back her bangs was part of her employee image. She appeared to be in her early-twenties. She looked normal in every way.

The woman suddenly cornered Azusa when she spotted her timidly entering the coffeehouse. She snatched up her right hand and vehemently shook it up and down.

“You’re Azusa, right? I’m Ichigo Himeji! Let’s be friends since we’re both human!”

“What? You are human too?! I totally thought you were a vampire as well!” Azusa exclaimed.

“No, no! Not me. I’m your run of the mill weakling human. Don’t lump me with the likes of Takeru!”

“What the heck? So mean. You make it sound like I’m some kind of pariah. How could you say that about me, Ichigo?” pouted the young man called Takeru. He walked over to Azusa and held out his hand.

"I heard about you from Kou. Let's get along, Azusa! We reserved the whole place for you guys today, so enjoy yourself to the fullest, okay?" Takeru flashed a fangy smile when Azusa accepted his handshake. "Also, if it's not too much trouble, I'd be happy if you became friends with Ichigo too."

"Sure!"

"Now, take a seat! Are you okay with the usual, Kou? Azusa, you can look at the menu and take your time deciding," Takeru said and led her to a table next to the window.

Kouya was already sitting at one of the two chairs gazing out the window with his chin on his hand. Azusa timidly sat in the seat across from him.

"Were you hurt at all?" Kouya asked the moment she sat down, only turning his eyes toward her. His eyes had returned to their natural red—he had removed his contact lenses at some point.

"Ah, no, I wasn't. I'm okay."

"Is that so?"

"Um, is this one of your favorite places to eat at?"

"I just come here every once in a while. Can't really call it a favorite."

"True. You can't call it a favorite spot, can you? Hasn't it been over half a year since you last stopped by, Kou? I was so lonely."

Azusa glanced in the direction of the pouting voice to see Takeru place two cups of coffee and one menu on the table.

"....."

"I'm such a nice fellow for reserving my entire precious restaurant, the source of my livelihood, for someone who isn't even a regular customer. Yup, this mustn't be one of his favorite places. How could he like a coffeehouse like this?"

"...It's my favorite coffee shop," Kouya gave in with a sigh.

"Good boy," Takeru grinned.

Azusa stared at them as they bantered. Takeru turned toward her before leaving and quietly whispered in her ear, "Azusa, you might want to remember this guy is weak to being pressured. Don't you want to ask him something?"

Takeru gave her a thumbs-up and left their table for the kitchen. Azusa sat up straight in her chair.

"Can I ask you something, Kouya?"

Kouya quit looking out the window and faced her.

Chapter 17: Miscommunication

WHY is Kouya treated like a monster? Is it true he doesn't drink blood? What's all this about him killing his older brother? Is the monster known as the Akaoni actually Kouya?

Various doubts, along with the greengrocer's words, swirled in Azusa's head. But none of them seemed like easy topics to bring up, making her hesitate to ask him. Kouya's eyes focused on her as he waited for the question she had wanted to ask him.

"Why don't you guys start by eating this before getting to the serious stuff?" Takeru offered, interrupting the grim mood. He carried a tray with sandwiches and corn soup for two. He gracefully placed the plates on top of the dainty acorn-shaped table.

"You didn't look like you were in the mood to order, Azusa, so I prepared our special for you. I got you the same as Kou...along with this."

Ichigo walked up behind Takeru carrying two gigantic parfaits. Takeru took them from her and placed them in front of Kouya.

"Here you go—the usual. Want me to pour chocolate sauce on it?"

"No need."

A wall of parfaits formed between Azusa and Kouya. Azusa drew a blank upon seeing it. Kouya and chocolate parfaits—somehow those two things didn't go together at all.

"Kouya...do you possibly have a sweet tooth?"

"...I don't hate sweets."

"You have a sweet tooth then."

Kouya's face twisted with disapproval, but he didn't deny it as he picked up his spoon. He took a huge chunk out of the parfait and plopped it into his mouth expressionlessly. There was something funny about what she was witnessing—an adult man was munching away on a delicious-looking, gigantic parfait with an expressionless face that said it wasn't delicious.

"Pft! Ahahaha!"

"....." Kouya put down his spoon and glared at Azusa who burst out laughing at him. It was his most displeased expression yet; coupled with two ginormous parfaits ruined any chance of it scaring her.

"I'm sorry! I wasn't trying to laugh at you!"

"Your statement loses all credibility if you say it while laughing."

"I really am sorry! It was just too funny! Plus, you're eating two at once."

"...I don't drink blood after all. I eat a lot more compared to most

people,” Kouya replied, touching on one of the main topics she had wanted to ask about.

“So it is true you don’t drink blood, Kouya?”

“Yeah. Everything the greengrocer said is true.”

“Then!”

Even the part about you killing your older brother? Azusa swallowed the words before she asked. She wanted to believe it wasn’t true, and even if it were true, she didn’t want her question to hurt him.

Aware of her thoughts or not, Kouya slowly began to speak, “The *Akaoni* he spoke of is me and it is also a fact I killed my older brother.”

“.....”

Kouya returned to silently eating his parfait as if to say he had nothing further to say on the matter. The sight of him eating a parfait no longer evoked the desire to laugh. She carefully sipped her cold coffee and ate her sandwiches in silence.

THE little bell hanging over the door jingled. Kouya and Azusa left Sumida Coffeehouse once evening arrived. The setting sun brightly illuminated the road home. Neither of them had said a word since Kouya’s confession.

Kouya broke the endless silence first, “I’ll talk to the Patriarch about taking me off guard duty starting tomorrow.”

“What?”

“Things will simply return to the way they were a week ago. Ichi will be your primary guard. Well, the Patriarch will likely order me to stay in the same building even if I’m off duty as your main guard, so you’ll have to endure that much.”

“Huh? What? What are you talking about, Kouya?”

“I’m trying to tell you that starting tomorrow Ichi will be your primary bodyguard, not me,” Kouya grunted. She was utterly confused.

“Wh-Why is that?”

“...Are you unhappy with that? Would you have preferred Subaru?”

“No, that’s not the problem here. Why won’t you be my bodyguard anymore?” Azusa asked.

Then it suddenly dawned on her—her initial impression that Kouya hated her. The woman he hated, to the point of not wanting to walk beside her, laughed at him for having a sweet tooth and dug up his painful past. Honestly, no one would be happy with someone after that. In other words, she was handed divorce papers. They weren’t

married, but that's what it felt like.

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing? That's the natural reaction. It's my fault for carelessly thinking you'd be okay because of how thickheaded you've been until now."

"Huh?"

I feel like we're talking about different things.

Kouya continued on indifferently, only glancing at Azusa as she tilted her head in confusion, "I'll do my best not to run in to you inside the mansion grounds as much as possible. Well, it's the same mansion, so I'm sure there'll be times we pass by each other, but I'd be grateful if you could stomach it."

"Do you hate me that much? To the point you don't even want to see me inside the mansion?"

"Huh?" It was Kouya's turn to be confused. "How did it come to that? Aren't you afraid of me?"

"Excuse me? Aren't we discussing the fact you hate me so much you no longer want to be my guard?"

"....."

"....."

A short silence fell between them. They stood frozen, looking into each other's eyes.

"Let's get things straight. I'm not wrong that you're afraid of me, right?"

"You are *SO* wrong! Why would I be scared of you?! What part of you are you saying I should be scared of? Is that something someone who scarfed down two gigantic parfaits with a straight-face should ask?" Azusa shouted without pause. Her intensity overwhelmed him.

"You don't mind that my eyes are red?"

"You're asking the person who thinks they are pretty?"

"...I'm the infamous Akaoni in this town though?"

"What a healthy vampire you are to not need blood!"

"I killed my bro—"

"I thought of asking you about that a little at a time!"

"....."

"Did you possibly bring up making Ichi my main guard again because you thought I was afraid of you?"

"I thought that's what I told you at the start of this conversation."

Azusa's mouth fell agape at Kouya's attitude that seemed to say, "*Don't say such confusing things.*" At the same time, she got the sense he was skilled at pushing others away. He was someone who could say, "*I'll leave you forever if you are scared of me,*" with his trademark expressionless face. It was very sad to think he had pushed people away like that until now.

“I am not the least bit afraid of you, Kouya,” Azusa declared.

Chapter 18: The Road Home

Kouya's POV

“I am not the least bit afraid of you, Kouya.”

A piece of me was relieved to hear her say that. I should be used to being the source of fear, envy, and other spiteful feelings, yet I felt some of the burden lifted from my heart at her words.

It's almost as if I wanted her to deny it...

I tore into myself like a spoiled child trying to get someone to acknowledge me. It wasn't my intention to do that, but it was the end result of what I did. I was comforted by this innocent girl I've known since she was four.

“Is that so?” I'm peeved by my inability to say anything sensible at a time like this, but she smiled at me anyway.

“My mother was killed by my older brother. I lost control and ended up killing my brother.”

The words were out my mouth before I realized it, regardless of the fact I had no intention whatsoever of bringing it up. Her eyes rounded with surprise for a moment, before her expression shifted to something softer and she nodded.

“I see.”

It's then I realized I wanted someone to listen to me. She gave her full attention to the words I spoke with a detached air. My story is a brutal one, yet the more the words flowed from me the more I felt a gradual cleansing of the filth caked onto my heart over the years.

Normal POV

“**MY** mother was killed by my older brother. I lost control and ended up killing my brother.”

“I see.” Azusa could only nod after hearing Kouya's indifferent confession.

“My older brother and I had different mothers and were two years apart. A two-year difference is practically the same age for vampires with long lifespans. We got along considerably well. Our mothers were on terrible terms, but we would occasionally meet up in

secret to hang out.

“My brother changed once he turned fifteen. It’s not a well-known fact, but for generations the Red Coven’s Patriarch would take on a name corresponding to the color red. Father received the name ‘Akashi’, meaning red earth, from the prior Patriarch. The Patriarch’s birth name changes the day he is chosen to become the Patriarch. My brother found out when he turned fifteen.”

“Is any name fine as long as it corresponds to something red in color? Like would hibiscus work?” Azusa was embarrassed hibiscus was the only red that came to mind.

Kouya sighed in disbelief, “...No one would take the Patriarch seriously with a facetious name like Hibiscus. Besides, hibiscus flowers are white and yellow as well, you know?”

“True. I’m sorry.” Azusa hung her head in self-reproof for interrupting him.

“As for how the names work...the ideogram for scarlet, dark red, crimson, rose madder, and vermilion are generally combined with another kanji for a name, since they are the easiest to work with. Of course, names with the kanji for red are also possible.”

“Then the ‘kou’ part of your name that comes from the kanji for crimson works too, right?! Ah, but you’re supposed to have the name changed to contain red after you become the Patriarch, right?” Azusa laughed. She meant it as joke. However—

“...Good guess. It was unofficially decided I would be the next Patriarch from the moment I was born with red eyes like our ancestors. Vampires are all about power—the top is determined by the strongest among us.”

“No way! You’re the next Patriarch—”

“Not anymore... My older brother went insane and killed my mother when he found out—I lost control and killed him. I was only thirteen and hadn’t awoken as a vampire yet, but my right hand went straight through his heart.”

“.....”

“I awakened as a vampire sometime after that, but every time I had the urge to drink blood, the death of my mother and brother hindered me. I’m completely used to not drinking blood now,” Kouya smiled.

It was the first time she had seen him smile. It was a strained smile, as if he had given up on everything. Azusa couldn’t find the words to say to him when faced with such sorrow and loss.

Noticing her reaction, Kouya altered his tone, “Vampires fundamentally awaken around twenty. You can’t tell them apart from normal humans until then. Once they hit twenty, we can determine who will remain human and who will awaken as a vampire. In

general, children born between two vampires will become a vampire. Although there are exceptions depending on how strong the parents' vampiric bloodline is. Those with strong vampiric blood are placed in a ranking from A to E."

"From A to E? Does that mean the Fs are—"

"Yeah, it's the rank for those who awakened as a vampire, but lose their mind. It refers to those who lose all sense of self. We categorize them as F rank and the majority become a threat to be disposed of."

"...How sad," Azusa mumbled without thinking.

Suddenly, it hit her that Kouya was the one disposing of the Fs. She feared her comment may have offended him. She timidly peered at his face.

"It is," he muttered with his usual lack of expression.

They walked home with nothing else to say to each other.

Azusa worried about who would become her primary bodyguard. She came to the arbitrary conclusion it would be Ichi, considering how Kouya didn't seem to like her very much—at least in her opinion. Akashi would likely permit the change if Kouya convinced him Azusa feared him.

***KOUYA** doesn't seem to enjoy himself at all when he talks to me, Azusa thought as she crawled into bed. My big plan to go out and get to know him better turned in to me acting on my curiosity and digging up his past all day. This is the worst thing that could have happened.*

"My mother was killed by my older brother. And I lost control of myself and killed my brother."

Azusa felt they had grown a little closer after Kouya willingly told her about his past.

Her eyelids grew heavy. As her consciousness slowly faded into the embrace of sleep, she hoped it would be Kouya who came to her room the next morning.

But the next day—

"Good morning, Azusa. I will be your bodyguard today!"

"Ah...okay. Thanks, Ichi."

A cheerful Ichi appeared at Azusa's door after she finished changing.

Chapter 19: Chiffon Cake and Ginger Cookies

APPARENTLY, I really was given a letter of divorce—even though we aren't actually married.

Azusa beat out her aggravation, misery, and every other vile emotion swirling inside her with the whisk.

"Azusa, the mansion has electric mixers as well, you know?"

"Yup, I know. Thanks, Ichi. But I'll do it by hand today," Azusa answered with a radiant smile.

"Ah, all right," Ichi responded, her expression stiff.

Oh no, it looks like I messed up.

Azusa was making a chiffon cake. She whisked the meringue by hand. She always baked with an electric mixer, but doing it by hand worked too.

With how well this is going, maybe I'll do the fresh cream by hand too. Ah, shoot, maybe not. My hands are cramping!

She proceeded to do everything by hand for the next hour. By the time their usual teatime arrived, her arms and hands ached.

"**WHAT** is wrong with you today, Azusa? You baked with the fury of a rampaging boar," Ichi remarked during the fun teatime they were having in Azusa's room.

"Nothing much. Just self-pity."

Azusa honestly felt too ashamed to admit she was upset with Kouya for quitting as her bodyguard.

Besides, I'm really happy and relieved Ichi is my bodyguard again. It's so much easier to have a woman with me instead of a man. It's just that despite how much I insisted I wasn't afraid of him, he one-sidedly tried to end our relationship! That annoys me! No, no, no! It seemed like he never liked me much from the start! I knew that, didn't I? Calm, I must be calm!"

"...Did something happen yesterday? Between you and Kouya?" Ichi asked gingerly.

Oh yeah, didn't Ichi say something about it before I went out with Kouya?

"You might make some bad memories today. Please be careful."

Ichi's warning repeated in Azusa's mind.

"Ichi, did you know Kouya is treated horribly in town?" Azusa asked, realizing what her warning pertained to.

"Ah, yes, I do. All the vampires here more-or-less know about the Akaoni... As I feared, you made some bad memories from the

experience.”

“Nothing bad about it for me, but I think Kouya probably did.”

Kouya stayed as tranquil as always on their way home.

But there's no one who wouldn't feel hurt after having those things said about them. Didn't I also force him to talk about his past, further rubbing salt in his wounds? Azusa slammed her hands on the table, pushing herself out of the chair.

“Ichi, I want to ask a favor of you. Can I?”

“What? Um, sure?”

“I want you to give this to Kouya for me!”

Azusa wrapped up the chiffon cake she made and freshly baked ginger cookies in a cute package and placed a card on it which simply read, “Thank you very much for accompanying me yesterday. Sorry for asking about a lot of stuff.”

She shoved it all into a paper bag and held it out to Ichi, who reluctantly accepted it.

“You want me to give this to Kouya? I don't mind, but I believe your homemade sweets are wasted on that sourpuss.”

“Sourpuss? ...Ichi, you're pretty hard on Kouya sometimes.”

“I am someone who believes all men aside from Subaru should perish from the face of the planet after all.”

I just heard something absurd. Apparently, this beautiful woman who dresses as a man despises all men—except for Subaru.

“Well, Kouya has been friends with Subaru since childhood, so he is still of a tolerable level, but I do not even want to breathe the same air as any other man.”

“You're passionate about that, huh?”

“Yes, I am.”

Azusa and Ichi exchanged looks and giggled.

“I did agree to do you a favor, but shouldn't you give it to him yourself tomorrow?”

“I couldn't even if I wanted to. I'd probably have to play hide and seek if I tried...”

From what Kouya said yesterday, he was going to avoid running into her when they were both in the mansion. Azusa smiled bitterly, knowing she could never beat him at hide and seek.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it is!”

Azusa pushed the confused Ichi outside her room. Another servant slipped in to the room to take her place as bodyguard.

“Okay, I will go bring it to him. I should be back in about five

minutes or so.”

“Thank you,” Azusa said bowing her head. She watched Ichi turn down the hallway.

She came right back—in less than five minutes.

“He was right there so I delivered it to him.”

“What? He was right there?”

“Yes. Oh, but he did leave soon after to run some errands.”

I should have given it to him myself then. There's no use crying over spilled milk, huh? This is totally one of those times. Azusa felt depressed. She looked over at Ichi, noticing her attempts to hold back her laughter.

“Did something happen, Ichi?”

“Yes. I am amused thinking back on Kouya's expression as he accepted the paper bag.”

“Why? Did he look disgusted?”

“No. Just that he made the funniest expression. His eyebrows knitted together in a grimace as he inclined his head thoughtfully. It was my first time seeing him make a face. I learned for the first time today that the sourpuss has muscles in his face too.”

“I-I see.”

Should I be happy or sad? I don't know. Well, guess I'll just be happy I got some sort of reaction out of him.

The rest of the day went on without any trouble. Subaru dropped by and chatted nonchalantly with the girls and confirmed the next day's plans with Ichi.

And then the next day arrived—

“Morning.”

“Uh? Kouya? Why?”

Kouya appeared before Azusa with a plastic bag.

Chapter 20: Teatime

“YOU were only gone yesterday because Mr. Akashi summoned you?” a surprised Azusa asked after hearing his explanation. Kouya, on the other hand, stared down at her as if there could be no other reason for his absence.

“Yeah. I told Ichi as much too.”

“You did? She didn’t say anything yesterday...” Azusa recalled her conversation with Ichi the prior day.

“Good morning, Azusa. I will be your bodyguard today!”

“I did accept to do you a favor, but shouldn’t you be the one to give it to him yourself tomorrow?”

It’s true she probably would have emphasized being my main bodyguard from now on if they had switched. And I doubt she would have so carelessly told me to hand it to him tomorrow if he was avoiding me. But it’s asking too much to expect me to come to any other conclusion with just those two hints. I mean, Kouya’s the one who just told me he was going to have Ichi return to being my primary guard the day before. It’s not my fault for misunderstanding. Azusa quietly blamed Ichi. But contrary to her bitter feelings, a natural smile lit her face.

“...Something up?” Kouya asked, peering at her face, curious why she was smiling like an idiot.

“I-It’s nothing!” Azusa spluttered. She couldn’t bring herself to honestly tell him she was happy he was going to continue being her bodyguard. She cleared her throat. “So? What’s with the bag?”

She changed the topic and stole a peek inside the bag. It was filled with strawberries, canned white peaches, oranges, apples, and several other fruits.

“Oh, this is the stuff I didn’t buy the other day.”

“Yeah. I bought it yesterday at another grocery store. Toss it if you don’t want it.”

“Toss it? I could never do such a wasteful thing! Why did you go out of your way to get it?”

Kouya’s face instantly clouded into an expression that conveyed his turmoil over how to answer her.

“You couldn’t buy it the other day because of me, right? Sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Whaat?! That was not your fault, Kouya! I merely chose not to buy it! How much did this cost you? I will pay you back!”

“No need.”

“No! There is a need! You need to take money and debts

seriously!” Azusa huffed and pressed him for an answer.

Azusa strictly adhered to the opinion you must always be stern with yourself and others when it comes to matters concerning money. Doing so would keep pointless arguments from arising down the line. Money is scary. Arguments concerning money are even scarier.

“...Then take it as thanks for the sweets you gave me yesterday,” Kouya mumbled.

“I will not! I gave you that as an apology! Let me pay you for the fruit I tried to buy the other day at the very least!”

“.....”

“.....”

He had no intention of accepting her money. They glared at each other for a good minute. Azusa lost the staring contest first.

“I know how we can make it even.”

“Hm?”

“**HERE** you go. Enjoy,” Azusa said placing the fruit tart she made, with the abundant fruit Kouya brought her, in front of him.

Baking him a fruit tart was her way of repaying him. She paid him for all the ingredients other than the fruit, but the fruit was clearly the most expensive ingredient. But she wrote off the extra cost with the price of the time and effort it took her to bake the tarts.

“I created two whole tarts, so there is plenty for you to have seconds.”

“Okay.” Kouya was displeased to have what he meant as a gift pushed back on him this way, but Azusa was on cloud nine after she finished baking.

“Come on! Dig in!”

Kouya stabbed the tart with his fork and brought it to his mouth. Azusa cut a piece for herself and took a bite. The fresh, sweet fruit juices spread across her tongue. The crumbly, baked cookie crust melted inside her mouth. The strawberry jam sauce topping tied the whole dish together.

“Does it taste good?” Azusa asked, full of confidence. Kouya looked astonished by how good it turned out.

“...You’re a good cook. The cake and cookies you made yesterday were delicious too,” Kouya awkwardly complimented her, which was enough to convey he truly meant it.

Azusa smiled bashfully. “I’m glad you liked it. You love sweets, don’t you?”

“...Not really. I just don’t hate them.”

“Oh come on, enough with the cool guy act! I know you love

them.”

“.....”

“Okay, I’m sorry.”

Kouya’s ferocious glare let her know teasing him was something best avoided.

“...I think you would make a great patisserie chef if you worked at Takeru’s place.”

Azusa remembered Takeru was the blonde girly-guy who served them at Sumida Coffee House.

“Takeru’s place had parfaits, right?”

“That’s all they have,” Kouya grumbled, displeased.

“Shall I make sweets for you from now on then?”

“Huh?”

“Actually, I pretty much make them every day, so let’s have tea together! Have tea with us!”

Azusa always drank tea with Ichi or alone when Ichi had other business to attend to. Her father, Shinji, lived at the mansion after his acquittal, but he had all sorts of other matters to deal with that they barely ever saw each other now. He seemed in good health though, and would try to say hi once a day when he had time. But that almost never overlapped with her teatime, so she would always make his portion and set it aside to give him later.

Hence, her teatime was always taken alone or with one other person. Azusa constantly thought it would be nice if Kouya, who was always with her anyways, would join her for tea—even if just for appearances.

“I won’t be so lonely and you get to eat sweets—Isn’t that two birds with one stone? A splendid plan if I do say so myself! I have to up my baking game tomorrow!”

“Hey, don’t decide on your own.”

“Oh? You don’t want to?”

“I didn’t say that...”

“It’s decided then! I will let Ichi know too!”

“.....”

Ichi’s look of absolute disgust after hearing the news is a story for another day.

Chapter 21: An Undesirable Change

ONE fine afternoon, Ichi and Azusa were enjoying teatime at a quaint table set outside the mansion as the spring breeze caressed their cheeks and played with their hair.

"Kouya has it rough being summoned again today," Azusa remarked, taking a sip of her jasmine tea.

"It seems he is supposed to go there every Wednesday. If I recall, the last time he was away was a Wednesday too?"

"Oh, you're right. I've lost my sense of time lately. I don't have school to remind me what day it is anymore." Azusa stretched her arms over her head. Her back popped in several places.

Two months quickly passed since she arrived at the mansion. She was getting perturbed by the monotony of each day. The only change as of late would be Kouya's participation in their teatime.

Even Ichi, whose man-hating habits kicked into full-bloom with repugnance over Kouya's presence at first, grew used to it with the passing days and eventually accepted him. However, her sharp-tongued attitude toward him never changed.

Those were the only changes—every day passed by blandly following the same pattern. Azusa frankly longed for change.

"Do you want to attend school, Azusa?"

"I guess so. It would be a lie if I said I didn't want to."

Truth be told, Azusa had given up on the idea. As someone not allowed to step foot outside alone, school was but a dream inside a dream. A troubled smile crossed her face.

"I'm sorry, Azusa," Ichi apologized upon seeing her smile.

"It's fine...really. Besides, it's not your fault! Plus, I was dumb!"

"Azusa—" Ichi was cut off by the rapid banging of a bell reverberating through the mansion.

The bell warned of a crisis—Azusa instantly figured out. Ichi's head jolted toward the sound. With amazing strength she picked Azusa up and leapt to the mansion's second-story window.

"Please don't move from this spot until I say it is okay!"

"Okay."

Ichi went through the open window and placed Azusa in the room before rushing up to the rooftop to get an understanding of the situation from above. In less than a minute, she returned with an alarmed look.

"Azusa, the Blue Coven is attacking us with a legion of animal familiars! We need to run. Please follow me!"

Azusa took the hand offered to her. Ichi picked her up in the same manner she had before.

“Ahhh!”

“We are going to bounce around a bit. Please be careful not to bite your tongue.”

Ichi leapt out of the window in one giant stride. She landed on a thick tree branch sixty-five feet away and jumped again to another branch and then another, covering large gaps of space in a quick amount of time.

“Um! Can you fly—agh!”

“You mean what Kouya does? I would need to drink a large amount of blood from Subaru if I want to use such a risky skill and fight.”

“Fight?”

“We need to keep that in mind as a pos...sib...ility...” Ichi’s words gradually spaced out like someone losing consciousness. Azusa realized the strangeness of it, but the endless rollercoaster-like upward and downward movement hindered her from saying anything without risking biting her tongue off.

“Ichi! Are...you...okay?”

“Yes. I am without problem,” she answered sounding stiffer and more robotic than usual.

THEY continued traveling through large leaps for another twenty minutes. Finally, they stopped in the middle of a dense forest. Ichi abruptly placed Azusa on the ground.

“Ichi, where are we?”

“.....”

Ichi stood dead-still since she put Azusa down. Her eyes vacantly stared into the distance. Azusa got a terribly bad feeling.

“Ichi! Are you okay? Please answer me!”

“.....”

Azusa frantically shook Ichi, but she didn’t answer her. Cold sweat trailed Azusa’s back and hands.

“You are torturing the poor thing with all your shaking. After all, my poison is keeping her consciousness locked in an inescapable cage,” interjected an icy voice.

Azusa warily looked in the direction of the voice to find a tall man with long hair standing in the middle of the forest with her. Half his translucent silver hair was pulled up, but it still held an eerie enough length to reach his calf. A blue glimmer came from his narrow, slit eyes. No doubt he was from the Blue Coven.

“Who are you?” Azusa cautiously questioned. The man bowed with frightening formality.

"I have come to retrieve you, Miss Azusa. You understand not resisting is in your best interest, yes?" he crooned and held up his long fingers to display the spiders and centipedes crawling on them. Apparently, he controlled bugs.

"What is going to happen to Ichi?! Will you remove the poison from her if I go with you?" Azusa asked at once. He said he poisoned her. Azusa was more worried about Ichi than anything else.

The man smirked and casually answered her, "Do not concern yourself with her. The poison will leave her system naturally within two days. It is not a life-threatening toxin in the first place. My goal was to control her psyche after all."

"Control her psyche?"

"Why do you believe she left you completely alone the day you fell from a normal kitchen into the forest?"

"...! Don't tell me you..."

Azusa recalled the day she exited the kitchen door and landed in a forest. She believed she had earned Ichi's trust, but apparently she was wrong. A blue butterfly appeared just before the incident—a *bug*.

"Indeed. I poisoned her then, but I had not expected it to take so long to gain this much control over her mind. Wasn't that butterfly gorgeous? I dare say my finest work yet. I gave the butterfly three objectives: to poison this woman, show you an illusion, and to use its body to create a door with transference magic embedded in it," he trilled, a look of pure bliss on his face, as he continued, "Guess what? She is the one who told me the Akaoni would not be with you today."

"No way..."

"It was a simple feat to create time for her to be unconscious with how deeply the poison has invaded her system," the man blissfully cackled. All the hair on Azusa's body stood on end. "As you have already conjectured, I am skilled at manipulating bugs and poisons. Controlling bugs allows me to even do things like this."

He snapped his fingers. Two pairs of glimmering lights appeared around him. The pairs of light rapidly increased, becoming uncountable in less than ten seconds. The oddly colored glowing embers approached, forming into the eyes of wild dogs. An exceedingly large pack made up of small to wolf-sized wild dogs growled at Azusa from behind the man. She nearly screamed and fell to her knees, but she endured the impulse to do either.

Now isn't the time to quiver in fear. Kouya should be able to find me if I drag things out here like this, Azusa assured herself.

"Fleas can be used in this way. Isn't it just marvelous?"

"....."

This had to be a part of the legion of animal familiars Ichi mentioned earlier.

“And the most amusing part of all is that I have given a single order to a pack a hundred times the size of the one behind me. What do you think it was?”

“I haven’t a clue.”

“I ordered them to ‘Kill Kouya Doumeki’. Isn’t that just fabulous?”

“...!”

The man’s lips curled in an arc and his long tongue brushed over his teeth in a twisted mockery of a smile. He ridiculed her with his snake-like expression.

“How unfortunate for you—your prince won’t come for you no matter how long you wait.”

Chapter 22: Raid

“HEY! Where did these mutts come pouring in from?!”

“Why are they here?! Protect Master Akashi!”

Kouya desperately tried to make his way out of Akashi’s manor amid the screams and uproar. He mowed down the beasts lunging at him from left and right, splattering their blood all over his clothes.

It all happened when he was summoned to Akashi’s house to give his usual report. A crazy pack of beasts charged into Akashi’s manor without warning. A quick glance around the room told Kouya they were wild dogs.

One of the servants who tried to stop them was devoured whole—not a single bone left behind where he once stood. They appeared to be normal wild dogs with no particular special ability, but somehow their mental limits were lifted, drawing out their latent strength usually locked away for self-preservation.

However, even in this strengthened state, they were no match for a vampire—except their sheer numbers gave them an overwhelming advantage. Just as ants can devour a grasshopper in a group, dozens of wild dogs targeted each person and voraciously devoured them, instilling fear in every vampire present.

And those wild beasts were after just one person—*Kouya Doumeki*.

Having realized he was the target, Kouya immediately left the manor in order to keep from pointlessly increasing the casualties.

Kouya was fed up with the wild animals chasing him no matter where he ran. He mulled over how to handle the situation. He considered escaping through flight, but crows and hawks in the same maddened state circled above him. If he fought in the sky, he wouldn’t only have to worry about what was coming from the right and left, but from above and below too.

He could foresee his doom if he got knocked out of the sky into the jaws of the wild dogs below. All things considered, playing with the wild dogs on the ground was the better bet. He noticed the enemies in the sky only watched from above as he battled the dogs on ground. The circling birds of prey showed no sign of descending.

Kouya raced through the forest while calmly thinking things over. Just then, he suddenly felt like something heavy sat on his head. He staggered and his back slammed against a tree. An intense dizzy spell hit him. He promptly shook off the dizziness and dashed off again, but the crazed animals were closer now.

“...!”

The blood drained from Kouya’s face; sweat dripped onto his

cheeks. He wasn't tired. Obviously, playing tag with the wild animals drained his energy, but a graver problem bore down on him. Or rather, all his problems were the consequence of that one thing.

"I'm thirsty."

For the first time in a very long time, Kouya had the urge to drink blood. He had been overusing his vampiric abilities too much lately. Flying was draining in and of itself, but creating familiars and seeing through their eyes and hearing with their ears is what had rapidly drained him of energy. And then there was this uproar. His instincts had begun seeking what was necessary for survival.

He couldn't think straight. He racked his dazed mind to come up with a plan.

What should I do from here? How can I drive them away? Why is this happening now? Just what is the mastermind behind this after?

And then it hit him—why hadn't he thought of it until now? The beasts were bait and a deterrent. Even if something were to happen at Azusa's mansion, the majority of vampires were paying attention to the Patriarch's manor now. And Kouya, Azusa's primary bodyguard, was held back by the wild beasts.

"Damn it!"

Having come to that conclusion, Kouya immediately changed direction. His thirst steadily twisted in his gut, an aching all-consuming need. It chipped away at his stamina and ability to think. He could ignore it for a time, but the thirst of a vampire can't be denied.

"HOW unfortunate for you—your prince won't come for you no matter how long you wait."

Azusa trembled with fear at the man's remark; it almost sounded like he read her mind. At the same, she worried for Kouya.

Kouya is a powerful vampire. He won't be taken down easily, she knew deep down, but the confident smile plastered on the man in front of her caused her to panic.

Again, as if he had caught wind of her thoughts, the silver-haired man's lips curled even more into a Glasgow smile. "Are you in a position to be worrying about others? You impress me."

"I am not worried. Kouya is fine." Azusa believed that from the bottom of her heart. But it was also a fact the worst-case scenarios were racing through her mind. Her fists were white from clenching them too hard and revealed more than enough about her mental state.

"At his full power he would be," the man calmly assessed, as if to mock her show of courage.

“What do you mean?”

“Just how many years do you think Kouya Doumeki has gone without drinking blood? It would be no different from a human living their entire life without consuming a single nutrient necessary for their survival—and surviving. If he fought at full strength and drew on hundred percent of his ability, he would be able to take on an army. No one could lay a finger on him, but he is currently drawing on a mere thirty percent of his full power, giving my creations a chance to kill him.”

“No!”

“No chance of that.”

Azusa shouted at the same time a third voice interjected into their conversation. The silver-haired man swiftly yanked on Azusa’s hand. With her hands held behind her back, her eyes were filled with the sight of Kouya covered from head to toe in the blood of his enemies.

“Marvelous! Just marvelous, Kouya Doumeki! However, it appears you did not escape unscathed.”

Kouya clicked his tongue. The blood of his enemies covered him so utterly she couldn’t tell at first, but closer inspection revealed gouges in his abdomen. Azusa gasped.

“Kouya! Are you all right?!”

“No worries,” he said, but his voice was stiff. His shoulders quivered painfully with every breath despite his brave façade.

“Leave her here and go.”

“I am sorry, but I cannot do that. Be my guest—try to take her from me by force.” The silver-haired man snapped his fingers.

The sound spurred the pack of wild dogs behind him to lunge forward in unison. But they were a pittance compared to the numbers Kouya purged on his way there. He held up his arm to swipe them down.

The man smirked with amusement, “You are not their target.”

“Ichi!” Azusa yelled just as a wild dog was about to latch its fangs onto Ichi’s jugular.

Kouya grabbed the wild dog’s tail and promptly tossed it aside. The dog flew high into the sky in an almost artistic arc and disappeared into the distant brush. It was too soon to relax—the pack members stood up in succession and took turns lunging for Ichi. Kouya took them all out. But their sheer numbers rapidly began pushing him back.

“Damn it all!”

“Kouya! Ichi!”

“Well then, time for us to depart, Miss Azusa.” The silver-haired man raised his hand and rammed it into the pit of Azusa’s stomach,

sending her consciousness into a dark abyss.

Chapter 23: Other Half

“I warmly welcome you, Azusa. Welcome to my abode,” said a boy Azusa’s age as he held out his hand for a handshake.

He appeared like a male student found anywhere in Japan. He had black hair and black eyes. He stood at about five feet two inches—just below Japan’s standard height. This average-looking person—looked like nothing other than a commonplace human. Yet this ordinary young man was the master of the old church.

Azusa had been carried to an antiquated church abandoned on the outskirts of the forest. She was led into a chapel that could easily fit a hundred people during mass. Dust covered wooden pews lined the right and left side of the large open room, leaving an aisle down the middle leading to a gorgeous stained-glass window.

Cracks and holes caused by the passage of time marred the window, but the moonlight beautifully shone through it nonetheless. A full moon lit the night. Several candles were the only lighting used in the chapel, but the moonlight pouring in through the stained-glass window was enough to make everything visible.

Azusa stood in the middle of the chapel, her eyes locked on the boy. The wooden cross that once adorned the wall below the stained-glass window had rotted with time and fallen onto the ground. The man sat on top of what was left of the once finely carved cross. He sat dressed in a school uniform, his legs spread out, looking up at the night sky through the cracks in the broken stained-glass window.

The silver-haired man urged Azusa inside the chapel. Her eyes met the boy’s—he broke out in a beaming smile. Being faced with a smile similar to one reserved for seeing a long-lost love again perplexed her. He welcomed her then.

Azusa swatted away his hand and glared at him with all the spite welling up inside her. The boy’s eyes rounded like saucers for a moment, before immediately regaining his smile.

“That hurt, Azusa. I’m a normal human, so I wish you would go easy on me,” he jested and held his hand out a second time, seeking to shake hands again. His expression overflowed with affection as if he were trying to tame a wounded animal. “Sorry for doing things the violent way. But I had to meet you no matter what.”

“.....”

Azusa turned away, ignoring his hand. She was shocked he admitted to being human, but didn’t let it show on her face. She only knew Ichi and Kouya for two months, but she had no desire to speak to the cretins who put their lives in danger. Escaping by herself was unlikely as long as the silver-haired man was nearby. Thus, this was

the best she could do to put up a fight.

"Oh yeah, I didn't tell you my name yet. Sorry about that. I'm Tsukiharu Hiragi. I don't mind if you casually call me Tsukiharu," he proclaimed with a sickeningly sweet smile. He dropped his hand, his expression and voice gentle. But Azusa could only take all of it in with disgust.

"....."

"I see. So that's how it's going to be? How sad. Looks like I need that Ichi girl and the Akaoni's assistance to get you to talk to me."

Clearly, that was a threat. Kouya could protect himself, but Ichi's consciousness was locked away by the silver-haired man's poison. She would move however he ordered her to.

Azusa bit her lip. "...What do you plan on doing to them?"

"You finally spoke to me! I'm thrilled! I prefer things the pacifistic way."

"You're the last person who can say that after today."

"Everything that happened was because Shiro acted on his own. I didn't give him any orders. I only requested he bring you to me. I couldn't sit still ever since the day I heard you, the girl I have been searching for all this time, had been captured by the Red Coven! I wanted to meet you so badly, Azusa."

"...You, the Blue Coven, are who found me first, right? Aren't you the ones who used the Yakuza to kidnap me?"

Tsukiharu stared at her puzzled. "That wasn't us, and I don't think it was the Blue Coven vamps' doing either. It sounds like a bad joke to use normal humans to kidnap someone as important as you. After all, it would be much faster for us to get you ourselves rather than ask someone else to do it. Besides, I would have never let the Red Coven get their hands on you if I found you first."

"Then who kidnapped me first?"

"No idea. We only learned you were carried into the Red Coven mansion in the middle of the night because Shiro happened to see it while staking out their town."

"Who was it then...?"

It's frustrating, but makes sense. If they were responsible for the first kidnapping, they would have been as aggressive as they were this time. There's no benefit to them for using weak humans when they want me badly enough to attack a whole coven, Azusa thought.

"Who knows? I don't think it was the Blue Coven either, but it's not like I actually confirmed it with them. It's also a possibility the Blue Coven isn't aware of you too," Tsukiharu muttered.

Azusa felt something off about the way he referred to the Blue Coven. "Aren't you guys from the Blue Coven?"

"If it comes down to whether we are with the Blue or Red Coven,

I'm human, but Shiro is with the Blues. I wonder if that makes me a part of the Blues too. But we're acting independent of any coven. The Blues and Reds have nothing to do with us."

"Then why are you after me?"

"If I were to sum it up with one word, I'd have to say it's because I am your fate and you are my fate, I guess."

His theatrical elocution and air of importance had Azusa furrowing her brow.

He widely opened both arms and laughed mockingly at her, "I'm the other successful experiment. Azusa, I am your other half."

Chapter 24: Blood and Body

“**DID** you think you were their only successful experiment? I’m another human born out of the research on the Ancient.”

“.....” Azusa was rendered speechless from the bombshell he dropped. Tsukiharu smiled with satisfaction at the look on her face.

“They are supposed to treat me a bit differently from you, you see? Contrary to the orders to capture you upon discovery, they are supposed to kill me on sight.”

“...Why?”

“Simple, because I possess the Ancient’s body and human blood, Azusa. You possess the Ancient’s blood. I’m the opposite of you.”

“...You’re lying.”

“It’s the truth. I’m still seventeen, the same as you. Guess you could say I’ve got about three more years to go before I awaken. And just as I’ll awaken as a vampire, I’ll lose my sanity. I’ll fall to F rank. Well, it’s quite the obvious result, really. They mixed human blood to pump through the Ancient’s body. I don’t even get the hope of thin vampiric blood somehow saving me,” Tsukiharu explained nonchalantly, in a tone that sounded no different from someone gossiping about an annoying occurrence in the neighborhood. But no emotion tinged his words.

“At this rate, I’ll become the strongest crazed monster with the Ancient’s body. That’s why they want me dead. I don’t want to be killed either. Nor do I want to lose my sanity. So I’m in need of the Ancient’s blood flowing through you. Do you understand my plight, Azusa? I’ll say it as much as you need—you determine my fate.”

“...There’s no proof what you’ve said is true,” Azusa finally squeezed out. It would be a terrible reality if what he said were true, but she had no guarantee what he told her was the truth.

“If you need proof I’ll give it to you,” Tsukiharu said and raised his right hand. A bluish-white flame popped into existence. The baseball-sized sphere of fire floated over his hand.

“It’s not like I’ve awoken as a vampire yet though. I’m already seventeen. I can do this much. Unlike how humans only become an adult on their twentieth birthday, vampires do not just suddenly awaken. The change comes gradually, with time. I even occasionally feel the thirst tickle at the back of my throat. I hate it.”

Azusa thought back to what Kouya told her. *“I was only thirteen and hadn’t awoken as a vampire yet, but my right hand went straight through his heart.”*

By age thirteen, Kouya had awoken just enough to his vampiric abilities to shove his bare hand through someone’s chest. Azusa had

no idea if everything Tsukiharu said was true, but she was convinced he was a human on the verge of becoming a vampire.

“So? Let’s say what you told me is true—what do you want me to do? You say you want my blood, but what exactly is it you want from me?”

“It’s simple, really. All you have to do is periodically supply me with blood.”

“That’s it?”

“No. I also want you to let me study your body. I doubt my body will be satisfied with just being supplied blood from you externally once I awaken as a vampire. I need to make it so my body can eventually recreate the Ancient’s blood naturally too.”

“.....”

In other words, he wanted Azusa as a tool to preserve his sanity. The furrow in Azusa’s brow deepened.

“Don’t like that? But is it any different from the position you are in with the Red Coven? Weren’t you a research specimen confined to that mansion? I will treasure you more than anyone or anything else. I won’t treat you as a guinea pig. I believe that point alone makes me a far better option.” Tsukiharu grinned as he took Azusa’s hand.

“You’re confused from hearing all this stuff out of the blue. Let’s eat, Azusa. I prepared food I thought you might like. We can take our time and talk over dinner, okay?”

“Don’t touch me.”

“You should obey me—that way there won’t be any unnecessary bloodshed.” Tsukiharu tightly squeezed Azusa’s hand when she tried to pull away. He affectionately stroked her cheek as her face twisted with the pain of his grip.

“You should submit to me—you have no choice but to submit. I mean, you can no longer leave my side now. The Red vamps will never come to get you back. I doubt they know where we are, and the Akaoni was left in such a pitiful state. Even if he knows where you are, it’s highly unlikely he will attack us.”

“Do you know how Kouya is right now?! Is he all right?!” Azusa leaned forward and pressed Tsukiharu for an answer.

She wanted to know what happened after she lost consciousness. The last time she saw Kouya he was fighting off a pack of wild animals while trying to protect Ichi. She knew most of the blood coating his body wasn’t his, but the blood gushing from the gouge in his abdomen was. Someone as strong as Kouya wouldn’t die easily, but she was still concerned for his well-being.

Tsukiharu removed his hand from her deathly pale face and covered his left eye with it. “I currently have my familiar flying over there. I still don’t have enough strength to do anything more than

share what my familiars see, but I've got a grasp of the situation."

"Tell me!" Azusa desperately pleaded with him.

Tsukiharu gazed at her, the corner of his lips curling up with amusement, "Let's eat together, Azusa. Do that and I'll tell you."

Azusa had no choice but to reluctantly nod.

Chapter 25: Two-man Rescue Plan

“HEY! I told you to wait, Kou! Where the heck do you plan on going?! Someone who slept for two whole days shouldn’t suddenly jump to their feet and run around!”

“Move out of the way, Subaru.”

Kouya and Subaru were arguing in the mansion hallway. They faced each other with deep frowns. The servants anxiously watched them glare daggers at each other.

“Master Akashi’s decision is final! Even you, his son, can’t overturn one of his decisions! Give up on Azusa! That’s the order!”

“I never said I was going to where she is.”

“Then where, might I ask, were you planning to go? In the middle of the night? With a hole in your stomach?”

“...For a walk.”

“Just how long do you think I have been your friend? Did you seriously believe you could get by me with such a transparent lie?”

“.....”

“I nearly had a heart attack when I saw you carrying Ichi back to the mansion. If our enemy is someone capable of doing that to you, we can easily bank on an outrageous number of our people getting slaughtered just to bring back one girl. The research into the Ancients hasn’t moved an inch since the day Shinji Saito disappeared with the pregnant Yayoi.

“You can pretty much say it was abandoned. I’ll admit the research might have gone somewhere with Azusa here. But it might not have. She was just a possibility. We can’t risk the lives of our people for a possibility. Master Akashi determined this is the best course of action.”

“I know.”

“You don’t know! You are one of our people, Kouya!”

“I have no intention of risking my life.” Kouya grabbed Subaru’s shoulder and moved him aside. Subaru snatched Kouya’s arm as he tried to pass by and pulled him back with all his strength. Perhaps it was all the excitement and emotion that caused the red tinges in Subaru’s eyes even though he hadn’t drank any blood.

“Blockhead! What can you do when you’re stumbling around like a newborn foal and are in need of blood? If you plan on coming back alive, go contract with someone this instant before heading off!”

“Can I contract with Ichi then?”

Subaru’s eyes turned completely red at the mention of Ichi’s name—she was still unconscious in her room. Subaru grabbed Kouya by the collar and head-butted him. Kouya’s body swayed from the

sudden attack, but he regained his footing before he fell over.

"I know it's a joke, but you're seriously going to make me lose it, Kouya!"

"You've already lost it."

"Get it together! Where do you plan on going when you don't know where Azusa is? You should have contracted with her for real to prevent this! You would have known where she is if you had."

The contract was a system based on a vampire's special ability to make anyone whose blood they drank into their familiar. If two vampires drank the other's blood, they could turn each other into familiars to monitor and control one another as equals—that was the true system behind the vampire contract. The extent of what the vampire could do with the contract varied with their power, but in general, most vampires had a grasp of where their partner was and a basic idea of the situation they were in.

Kouya came to a halt as if Subaru's words had spurned some new realization in him. He spun around to face Subaru.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm going to the laboratory."

"The lab? Don't tell me you're—" Subaru paled at the foreboding possibility that crossed his mind. The possibility turned into reality with Kouya's next words.

"I am."

"Are you insane? We drew Azusa's blood samples over two months ago, y'know?! We only drew a small amount the day she was kidnapped! You're definitely going to have an upset stomach!"

"Have you tested it before?"

"As if I would! I feel like throwing up just thinking about drinking blood more than two months old!"

"I'll manage it one way or another."

"You will?! Can you?! Can you even drink blood?"

Kouya fell silent.

Subaru pat Kouya on the shoulder. "See? Don't force yourself."

"...Nah, I was just thinking how thirsty I am now."

"Kou..."

Looking at his friend who wouldn't budge an inch, Subaru heaved such a long sigh it seemed like he was letting out all the air in his lungs. He knew full-well there was nothing he could do when Kouya got like this. He wanted to stop him, but he was incapable of stopping him. He was well aware the man in front of him appeared cool and calm on the outside, while a fiery temper simmered under the surface.

"It'll be your first taste of blood in a long time, right? Don't pass out. I don't want to nurse you and Ichi back to health, Kou."

“...You’re coming with me?” Kouya asked wide-eyed when Subaru walked beside him. Subaru glowered at him.

“I’d be an extremely heartless fool if I nonchalantly saw you off after all this.”

“I wouldn’t mind if you did though.”

“Just what kinda person do you think I am? Obviously, my pride wouldn’t let that one slip. Plus, I was just thinking how much I’d love to punch out the guy who hurt you and Ichi.”

“I see.”

“Now that it’s come to this we’ll definitely get Azusa back!”

“Yeah.”

Subaru stopped walking as something dawned on him. Kouya followed suit and stopped too.

“By the way, why are you so attached to Azusa? When it comes down to it, she’s just a normal human, right? She’s not kin. Aside from her blood, she’s a normal human who has only been around for two months. You don’t have the kind of relationship to merit putting yourself in danger to rescue her.”

“About that...”

Kouya hadn’t told Subaru he knew Azusa since she was four. It’s not that he feared Subaru would inform Akashi if he knew. He merely didn’t see a need to inform him. All there was between them over the years were the letters sent to him once every six months by the spy he placed near her. Reading the letters was the extent of his knowledge of her since the day he disappeared from her life. He believed never seeing each other again would be best for both of them, and that it was unnecessary to mention anything about it when they reunited. But perhaps the time had come to tell him.

With that thought, Kouya opened his mouth to explain, when—

“Are you in love?”

“Huh?” he accidentally let out a dumbfounded groan.

“I see! I see! It’s the springtime of your life! Rose-colored days finally came to you!” Subaru went on excitedly, a complete change from the dire tone he spoke in earlier.

Kouya punched him in the head, holding back just enough to keep from killing him.

Subaru went flying down the hallway and tumbled before he smashed into the wall. Nearby staff squeaked as they rushed to help.

In a loud groan Subaru moaned out, “That hurt!”

“Good. Quit babbling about stupid stuff. If you’re coming, let’s get a move on,” Kouya said with an exasperated expression and walked off leaving Subaru behind. Subaru brushed the dust from his body and ran to catch up.

“Okay, okay. Aaah, I sure hope we don’t die.”

“Run away before you die.”

“I planned on doing so even if you didn’t tell me to.”

Chapter 26: Breakout

“**HERE** you go, mackerel simmered in miso,” Azusa said placing the simmered miso mackerel, freshly cooked white rice, and simple vegetable soup in front of Tsukiharu.

“You’re a good cook, huh, Azusa? Thanks. I look forward to trying it.”

“I didn’t make it for you, but go ahead and eat it.”

Azusa and Tsukiharu were sitting in a large stone building adjacent to the church. The building had been used either as housing for nuns or as an orphanage at one point. It had been gorgeously remodeled into a two-story, stately manor equipped with a basement and modern amenities. They sat across from each other eating at a dining table in the kitchen.

“I’m such a lucky guy to get to eat your home cooking.”

“I merely cooked for myself because I didn’t think my stomach could withstand eating rich full course meals three times a day, *every* day.”

Three days quickly passed since Azusa was brought to the church. The silver-haired man, known as Shiro, controlled servants with fleas to cook and tend to their every need. Each meal they prepared was luxurious enough to be mistaken for three-star Michelin French cuisine. The rich, hearty full-course meals were served three times a day, regardless of whether they had an appetite.

Azusa endured the food at first, but the bare thread holding her patience together finally snapped on the third day of recurring heartburn and indigestion. She snatched the ingredients and kitchenware from the servants and set about cooking for herself over an hour ago. The mackerel meant to be cooked as *meunière*, was instead simmered in miso paste. The vegetables meant for some grand white sauce *sauté* were stewed. She wrapped up the freshly baked bread and stored it in the freezer for later—rice and soup replaced it.

“But I’m happy you made some for me as well. Thank you.”

“Even you eat food like a normal person, right? I just had extra to spare.”

“Yeah. This is nice. It feels like we’re a family,” he smiled, sipping at his soup. Azusa thought he looked like an ordinary high school student when he smiled that way.

Tsukiharu cheerfully ate several bites of his food before he noticed another set of dishes at their table. “Oh, you made some for Shiro too? Thank you. But he won’t eat with us.”

“I only made extra because I thought it would be weird to make you some and not do the same for the silver-haired guy. It’s fine if you

leave it. I'll just eat the leftovers for lunch tomorrow."

Tsukiharu stared at the extra mackerel sitting in the pot. "I've invited him to eat with me several times, and he still won't. I was kinda lonely. So I'm happy I've had the chance to eat with you lately."

"I see." Azusa averted her eyes from his smile. She wanted to show she had zero interest in getting any friendlier with him.

"Oh dear. You didn't pity me after hearing that? You didn't think, 'he doesn't have anybody to eat with. Poor thing'? You didn't sympathize with me at all?" Tsukiharu purred, further rubbing Azusa the wrong way.

"...I did not. Someone who is really hurting wouldn't jest about it."

"I see. How philosophical of you."

"....." The way he mocked her irked Azusa.

Tsukiharu smiled as if to say not to be angry with him. "Sorry for poking fun at you. But I really am happy. Thank you, Azusa."

"....."

"Now that I think about it, weren't you brought up in a normal household?"

"You weren't?"

"The only person to ever escape the laboratory was the woman pregnant with you. The Blue Coven lab rats secretly transferred the person who gave birth to me to another facility. I was born and raised in that facility. I never met my parents or had a home. All I've ever known are people in white lab coats and the cold sanitized four walls of my room. That's why I'm a little envious you know what it's like to have a *family*."

"...I see," Azusa responded, a little choked up. Tsukiharu's gloomy face instantly blossomed into a brilliant smile.

"Did you sympathize with me this time?" he beamed.

"...You're sick." Azusa was ashamed of herself for sympathizing with him a little. Agitated, she glared at him, only to get a full view of his unconcerned expression.

"Anything works for me. Sympathy, anger, hatred. Obviously, nothing compares to love, but I'll take any emotion that will make you stay with me."

"You're crazy."

"You think so? But I haven't once lied to you. I'm just desperate."

"Because you don't want to die?"

"Yeah...that's a part of it," Tsukiharu mumbled vaguely.

That's not all of it then? Azusa wondered.

BANG! The window shattered into a hundred fragments. The room filled with flames. The flames spread between Azusa and Tsukiharu as if to separate them on purpose.

“A Molotov cocktail? I’m someone who’s about to become a vampire!” Tsukiharu yelled, covering his mouth with his sleeve to avoid inhaling the billowing smoke.

At the same time, someone yanked on Azusa’s arm. The momentum pulled her to the chest of the person who grabbed her before she could even scream.

“Kouya?!”

“...Don’t talk. You’ll inhale the smoke.” Kouya swiftly raised his arm. The flames followed the movement of his arm and assaulted Tsukiharu, swallowing him whole in a matter of seconds. Another glass shattered and the flames tripled in size.

“Let’s go.”

Kouya tossed Azusa over his shoulder and jumped out the broken window.

Chapter 27: Flames

THE last Azusa saw of Kouya, he was sleeping on a bed like he was on the verge of death.

“Don’t worry, he’s not dead,” Tsukiharu coaxed with a smile at Azusa who was staring a hole through Kouya’s reflection in the water mirror.

Knowing he was alive didn’t keep his deathly ill countenance from haunting her. She saw him in that state three days ago.

“Are you okay?” Kouya asked, looking her over with his usual expressionlessness. He put her on the ground in front of him. His deathly pale skin had regained its color. Azusa felt all the strength rush out of her body.

“Kouya, you’re all right!” Azusa closed the distance between them, forgetting to answer the question he asked her. She hysterically grabbed the hem of his shirt and clung to him with teary eyes.

Kouya gulped and caught his breath. “Yeah,” he replied.

Azusa relaxed and smiled. “Thank goodness.”

“What about you?”

“Ah, yes. I’m all right. I was doing well enough to have just finished cooking a meal.”

“Huh?” Kouya gawked. He hadn’t expected that answer.

“I’m glad to see you’re safe, Azusa. Kou, let’s hurry home. Things are going to get ugly if the silver-haired man gets back, right? We’ll void the point of attacking while he’s away,” Subaru cautioned, while twirling an unlit Molotov cocktail. He nonchalantly waved at Azusa when their eyes met. “Ichi hasn’t woken up yet, so you’re stuck with someone who’s not as good at fighting. Sorry about that.”

“Is Ichi all right?”

“The poison left her system. I think she’ll wake up soon... We really should start running while we chat! My friend here acts as little more than a distraction.” Subaru flicked the Molotov cocktail in his hand and winked. Kouya nodded lightly in agreement and picked up Azusa.

The roof of the brilliantly burning mansion crackled as it collapsed in on itself.

“This sucks. Sucks. Sucks. Sucks!”

A sinister groan rumbled the very earth they stood on as the mansion further collapsed. A shadowy figure slowly stood from the flames and rubble.

“What is Shiro doing at a time like this? I have to scold him when he gets back.”

“Tsukiharu?” Azusa gasped. Kouya and Subaru turned toward

what she was looking at.

“What is he? He wasn’t just the lookout?” Subaru marveled.

“...He looked human to me. At least, for now,” Kouya added.

“But he seriously doesn’t look like someone who hasn’t awakened yet,” Subaru said, cold sweat trailing his brow as his eyes locked onto Tsukiharu. Kouya gravely watched him too.

Tsukiharu had created a transparent, thin membrane oval around himself. His clothes were seared in various places, but not a single scratch was on his body. As if to display his fury, his hair swayed even though there wasn’t any wind.

“Ahh, but Shiro’s can come later. Your punishment needs to come first. And Azusa, dear, where were you trying to go?”

“.....”

“Oh, I see. I see. You still prefer them? I expected as much. Yup. It’s fine...it’s just peachy, really. I planned on having you *sympathize* with me, but I’ve changed my mind. I’ll kill these guys and become the target of your *hatred*. Yeah, I’ll do that. I don’t know if I can defeat the Akaoni with a body that hasn’t awakened yet... But I’ll probably do fine. I won’t lose to a fool who doesn’t drink blood. Cheer me on from the sidelines, Azusa,” Tsukiharu babbled on maniacally.

Something was off about him. Azusa held her breath at the completely different aura coming from him than what she had experienced until now.

“Kouya, Subaru, it seems like he is a human with an Ancient’s body, created from another experiment like me.”

“...Huh? What the heck? I never heard anything about an experiment like that...”

“.....”

“I don’t know if it’s true or not, but that is what he told me.”

“...This is bad.”

“Let’s run for it, Subaru.”

“Right there with ya!”

“I won’t let you escape.”

Subaru’s body went flying. His body slammed against a tree, cracking it. Subaru moaned as some of his bones broke.

“Akaoni, put Azusa down. I don’t want to hurt her too. I’m not good at controlling my strength yet.”

Kouya put Azusa down.

“Kouya!”

“Go over there,” Kouya ordered, pushing Azusa away. She fell forward and caught her balance. By the time she turned around, their battle had already begun.

TSUKIHARU swung his arm, his fingertips cleanly slicing away the bangs hanging over Kouya's eyes. Kouya grabbed his arm and threw him off-balance with a one-arm toss. A tree shattered at the impact, softening his blow. Tsukiharu stretched out both arms and summoned a wall of blue flames to surround them both.

"This is all I can manipulate at this point. But it's more than enough for you. You've awakened as vampires, but all your intermarriage with humans has rendered you incapable of doing something as simple as this, hasn't it?" Tsukiharu taunted.

"....."

"I'll burn you alive."

Tsukiharu raised his hand and the flames converged into a raging tornado that came down on Kouya. A scream ripped from Azusa's throat, but her voice couldn't reach them now. Kouya narrowly dodged the shrieking flames of the tornado, but the seemingly living flames circled around and around to engulf him. Kouya barely escaped by forcing his way through the flames in an explosion of inhuman speed. The shockwave scattered the flames.

"You're as tenacious as I would expect for the Akaoni. How do you like this then?"

The flaming tornado suddenly split into three and two of the three tornados convolved on Kouya. The third tornado headed straight for—

"...!"

Azusa!

She heard Kouya click his tongue next to her ear. He had thrown himself in front of her and was swept up by the spiraling third tornado. It sucked him up to the top and slammed him back on the ground.

"Kouya!" Azusa shouted. The oscillating flames engulfed him. It all happened too fast. The blood drained from her face at the terrifying scene before her.

"What an idiot. There's no way I would harm Azusa," Tsukiharu laughed mockingly. His face filled with the confidence of a guaranteed victory. But one second later, his face stiffened.

"Did you say something, brat?" snarled a deep voice as the blue flames instantly vanished. Amid the vanishing flames stood Kouya, his eyes glowing a deep crimson.

Chapter 28: The Silver Knife

"I see. He drank blood? *The* Akaoni did?" Tsukiharu mumbled to himself, grasping the reason for Kouya's newfound strength. His widened eyes slowly narrowed and his lips curled into a placid smirk. "But from the looks it, you only drank a drop at most. Plus, seems like you've used most of your strength to repair your body."

"....."

"I can win if that's all I'm up against." Tsukiharu raised his hand, the broken trees and debris scattered around them lifted into the air. Glass fragments from the smoldering building glinted amid the floating debris. The glass and branches turned their sharpest point toward Kouya.

"Hopefully it just ends with writhing pain," Tsukiharu said and lowered his hand. A countless number of jagged tree branches and glass fragments flew at Kouya from all sides.

"Futile."

"...!"

Just when Tsukiharu thought he sent an attack no one could dodge, a blinding flash accompanied Kouya's one word. Once his vision cleared, Tsukiharu saw all his weapons had turned to a cloud of ash. Unlike Azusa, who couldn't follow the instantaneous attack, exhilaration filled Tsukiharu's face.

"Amazing...that was a plasma attack, right? Maybe calling it lightning would be easier to understand. Even I can't use that yet. Awesome...mind-blowing, really. Looks like the name Akaoni wasn't just for show after all."

"....."

"Too bad for you; I'm the more amazing one here!" Tsukiharu exclaimed and raised both his hands.

Ten times the amount of debris, glass, and trees lifted into the air and aimed for Kouya. Another wave of flashes cracked down from the sky and filled the forest with blinding light. Ash fluttered from where the debris once floated.

"I told you it's futile."

"You're amazing. Truly, impressive," Tsukiharu cheered, clapping his hands, glee filling his face. Almost as if he were an owner impressed by his dog's new trick. Kouya's frown deepened at Tsukiharu's reaction.



AZUSA desperately strained her eyes to see the battle through the blinding flashes of light. The third blazing flash cracked down. She could tell it was coming this time from the way they postured, so she hid her face behind her arms to keep her eyes from blurring again.

The flashes finally stopped. She opened her eyes to see the debris gunning for Kouya raining down as ash. Kouya and Tsukiharu faced each other under the black ash rain. They glared at each other; tension so thick running between them they almost seemed to stop breathing. Azusa spotted something glinting in the pile of dirt behind Kouya.

That's...

"Kouya! Look ou—" Azusa shouted just as a knife sprung out of the dirt and embedded itself deeply into Kouya's back.

"Agh... Silver?" Kouya groaned.

"Yes. A silver knife. This was my trump card, so I didn't want to use it, but you were the one person who could get me to," Tsukiharu sneered.

Kouya pulled the knife out of his back—blood spurt out and showed no signs of stopping.

"Silver is still an effective countermeasure against vampires. Isn't it especially useful against a vampire with power on par with our ancestors like you? I have silver knives buried all over this area. I can attack you from anywhere, at any time."

"Damn it..." Kouya staggered.

"Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you all the knives have been dipped in the poison I had Shiro make. It's not a poison that will kill you right away, but it appears its effectiveness is...superb," Tsukiharu speculated upon seeing the sweat trickling down Kouya's face. "I dare say it's taking all your strength to stay standing, no? You can't summon any more lightning in that state."

"....."

"Guess it's time to finish this."

Tsukiharu raised his hands again. However, he didn't pull up trees and debris to fling at Kouya this time. Twenty silver knives ripped from the ground and lined up in front of Kouya like a military execution. All twenty knives flew at him.

"Kouya!" Azusa ran forward to protect him. But the battle was over before she could even get close.

Three knives.

Only three silver knives pierced Kouya's body. The remaining seventeen knives snapped in half or were repelled into the surrounding trees. However, the battle wasn't over yet.

SPLAT! Tsukiharu plunged his hand through Kouya's abdomen with a grotesque sound and ripped it back out. Blood dyed his hand a

dark red.

“Damn it!”

“Oh wow, to think you still had that much strength left...”

Kouya narrowly leapt out of the way of Tsukiharu’s hand coming to pierce through his chest. A single scratch marred his pristine face. He nonchalantly jumped back to a boulder thirty feet away and looked down at Kouya.

“It’s over, Akaoni.”

“...!”

“Don’t!” Azusa jumped in between them. A silver knife glinted in her right hand. She pointed the blade straight at Tsukiharu.

“Move!” Kouya painfully shouted behind her. He was on his knees gasping for air, his shoulders heaving with the effort to breathe. Blood pooled beneath him.

“I don’t want to!”

“Azusa!”

“I said I don’t want to! Silver knives are like kryptonite to vampires, right? It should work against Tsukiharu too then!”

“Azusa, are you possibly thinking you can defeat me? Seriously? Haha...hahaha!” Tsukiharu burst out laughing like he was greatly enjoying himself. He laughed so hard tears came to his eyes. “You really are the best! You think you can defeat me when even the great Akaoni couldn’t? With just one measly knife? You’ve surpassed recklessness and stupidity in one audacious act!”

“...We won’t know the impossibility of it until I try!”

“I know! It’s impossible, Azusa. It’s not possible for you. You are a normal human girl! The only one who has the slightest chance of killing me is the barely alive Akaoni behind you!”

“.....”

“It’s impossible. It’s absurd. It’s reckless. You can’t even hurt me with that knife,” Tsukiharu laughed. Azusa glowered at him. Something thudded behind her.

“Kouya!”

Azusa quickly looked over her shoulder to find Kouya had fallen from his crouched position as if he was at death’s door. She rushed over and knelt down to help him up, his blood coated her arms in a thick, sticky red.

“Aww, he’s really going to die on us. He might have won if he drank a little more blood before coming too. It’s kinda disappointing.”

“.....”

“...Well, whatever. Let’s go, Azusa. I have several other hiding places. I know just the place no one will ever find us.”

“Don’t come any closer!” Azusa pointed the knife at Tsukiharu again.

“I told you that you can’t hurt me.” He grumbled in an almost disappointed tone.

“...Then, all I have left to do is this.” Azusa ran the blade along her wrist and dragged it across. Blood gushed from the long slice and streamed down her hand.

“Wh-Wh-What are—”

Azusa cast a sidelong glance at the flabbergasted Tsukiharu as she brought her bleeding wrist to Kouya’s mouth.

Chapter 29: Another Battle

TWENTY minutes earlier.

Subaru woke up resting against a sizable tree trunk in the middle of a forest. Blood dribbled from his mouth to his chin. He wiped the blood off with his sleeve and immediately ascertained the situation. He remembered raiding the building next to the church and successfully getting Azusa back. Everything was clear until the point he stepped forward to run away from the monster in human flesh known as Tsukiharu.

"I'm pathetic," he grumbled to himself. He felt pathetic when the gut-wrenching pain in his stomach informed him he had been taken out of the battle before things got started.

Things wouldn't have turned out this way if I could have drawn out my true ability, he thought, but it was too late for regrets. It was inevitable things would turn out this way—he hadn't drank any blood. *I couldn't drink Ichi's blood with her hurt like that...*

Blood was closer to a vampire's lifeline than their body. For that reason, they were greatly affected by the amount and quality of the blood they took in and produced. Subaru couldn't bring himself to take any of her blood when she was recuperating.

Lightning flashed a good-hundred feet away. Subaru instantly took that as a sign Kouya and Tsukiharu were fighting.

"I need to at least help Azusa get away..."

Kouya's at an outrageous disadvantage if he's fighting while protecting Azusa. Tsukiharu seemed attached to her, but that's not enough to guarantee he won't put her in danger to get to Kouya. Subaru stepped toward the flashes, only to hear an unnatural sound behind him. Branches were being crushed under feet and something of substantive weight was being dragged across the forest floor. Subaru cautiously turned around.

Long silver hair came out of the densest part of the overgrowth, followed by a finely chiseled face with glowing blue eyes. Undoubtedly, this was the man Kouya told him could control animals. A human corpse dangled from the man's right hand. His fingers wrapped around the throat of what was once a young woman and dragged her body behind him. Bite marks shimmered with blood on her white throat.

"It is unpleasant to be interrupted during mealtime. Master Tsukiharu wouldn't be pleased with me if he found me like this either."

"You're—"

"Hello. How do you do? Pardon my rude request upon our first

meeting, but would you mind moving from there?" The silver-haired man snapped his fingers.

Two gigantic black Irish Wolfhounds appeared on both sides of him. The dogs would come higher than seven feet tall if they stood on their hind legs. Even without standing on two legs, their heads came to Subaru's chest—they looked big enough to ride. Baring their fangs, a deep growl rumbled from their throats. The two Wolfhounds might actually be superior to packs of wolves had it come down to it.

"The majority of my pets were killed by the Akaoni. All I have left are the two you see here. However, they are the ones I took special care to raise, so while they may not be up to the task of defeating you, I can assure you they will be enough to keep you here."

The Wolfhounds took some sort of invisible signal from the man's eyes to lunge at Subaru with lightning speed. They attacked Subaru with a speed and strength that went beyond having their natural limitations released.

"I wish you wouldn't underestimate me," Subaru said, swiftly crushing one of the dog's heads. Blood splattered from the caved in skull; red specks painted Subaru's cheeks. He spun around and landed a roundhouse kick into the gut of the other dog, sending it flying into a tree. "I might not be as strong as Kou, but I'm strong enough. I won't lose to some mutts."

"Ooh," Shiro murmured, impressed. Subaru glared at him.

"Are you the one who put Kou and Ichi through hell?"

"By Ichi, are you referring to the woman guarding Miss Azusa? If so, the answer is yes."

"...Perfect then. I was just thinking how badly I wanted to punch your lights out."

"If you can land a hit that is," Shiro sneered and curled his finger. The dog Subaru thought he killed with his roundhouse kick, lunged at him. Subaru caught his breath at the unexpected attack.

"What a coincidence, Subaru. I wanted to punch out his lights too," someone said and came crashing down from the sky. Ichi gracefully landed on the ground with her katana piercing through the wild dog below her. "Sorry for my late arrival."

She ripped her sword from the dog's body and shook the blood-dripping point toward Shiro. With her free hand she undid her shirt collar and exposed her throat.

"I have caused a lot of trouble for you. Please allow me to clear this dishonor by offering my blood."

"Ichi, have you recovered?"

"No need to worry about me."

"I see. Sorry for doubting you." Subaru wrapped an arm around Ichi and bit deeply into her neck. The blood gurgled down his throat

as he resupplied his reserves. His green eyes were dyed a deep crimson by the time he lifted his face from her neck.

“Please deal out my wrath on him too.”

“I will.”

Shiro instinctively took a step back, an expression like none before coloring his face. He was beginning to feel his first taste of panic. Sweat trickled down his cheeks.

“Did you say your name was Subaru?” Shiro asked.

“I did.”

“Are you quite possibly Subaru of the Shiranui Family? One of the three candidates to become the Red Coven’s next Patriarch?”

“Your knowledge of my bloodline will speed things up. I’m Subaru Shiranui. I’m now going to punch your lights out.”

Subaru heard Shiro catch his breath. A natural reaction. His special attack force of wild dogs had already been annihilated by Kouya and Subaru. His own body probably wasn’t that strong, otherwise he wouldn’t rely solely on familiars. Shiro was the type not meant to stand on the frontlines where hand-to-hand combat was required. It wasn’t unreasonable for him to panic upon learning his opponent was the candidate to become the next Red Coven Patriarch.

But Shiro showed no signs of panic as he smiled. “I am...at a great disadvantage here. I will take this time to bow out.”

“Do you think I’ll let you get away?” Subaru snarled.

“My apologies, but I will allow myself to withdraw from your presence.” Shiro spread his arms, releasing a swarm of butterflies—signaling the start of their battle.

Chapter 30: Bloodsucking

BLOOD spilled from the cut in Azusa's wrist—enough to run down her hand and make a small puddle on the dirt. She let the blood drip from her wrist into Kouya's mouth where he laid face up.

"Kouya?" Azusa peered into his barely open eyes. His red eyes slowly focused on her. "Is it not enough? Hold on, I'll make a deeper cut—"

"No need." Kouya grabbed her hand before she could slice her wrist a second time. He pulled her bleeding wrist toward his mouth.

"Ow!"

A piercing pain rushed through her. The cut she made with the knife burned more than hurt, while this blatantly hurt. Of course it did—Kouya's fangs were digging deeply into the knife wound on her wrist. The sound of his throat gulping made it register in her mind that he was drinking her blood.

"AKAONI! Get away from Azusa! That's mine!" Tsukiharu bellowed rabidly. Azusa had never heard him yell. She turned to look at him and saw every object that could be used as a weapon in their vicinity floating in the air, primed to attack. He looked like he could kill someone. Kouya gulped down more blood, ignoring him.

"...!" Tsukiharu was like a wild animal with its fur standing on edge and its back arched up to attack. His eyes filled with seething rage and his entire body quivered.

A single light propelled from Tsukiharu and grazed Azusa's cheek. A silver knife flung at her faster than the human eye could see. Blood oozed from the slice.

"Azusa. If you don't get away from him, my attacks will hit you too, you know? You okay with that?"

"If you've got the balls to do it, then do it," Azusa goaded.

"...!"

A silver knife grazed her right shoulder. It sliced through her shirt and skin, spilling blood down her elbow. Azusa bit her lip to endure the pain of her flesh being cut in different places and pulled Kouya onto her lap with her back turned to Tsukiharu. She made that move with the assumption she could keep him from being killed—it only served to grate on Tsukiharu's nerves.

"Azusa. Did I not tell you that you are my fate and I am yours? I don't want him to get between us. Get away from him right now. Your blood belongs to me."

"Stop babbling on about nonsense like fate and take a cold hard look at reality! My blood is mine alone!"



“Move aside, Azusa.”

“I won’t!” A knife lodged itself into her left shoulder. “Ah!”

“Doesn’t it hurt? I removed the poison for your sake, Azusa, but it still hurts, doesn’t it? He’s not worth getting hurt to protect. Sure, he came for you, but that’s only to bring you back as their pet guinea pig. He only sees you as a useful tool to advance their experiments. They don’t see you as a person. As you.”

“...Then you’re no different from them! You only see me as a tool for my blood! If my only choice is to be seen as a guinea pig by either party, I choose to be with the side I feel most comfortable with!”

“I told you I’m different from them...” Tsukiharu said dolefully and sent another knife at her. Azusa hunched over and braced herself for the pain as she wrapped her arms protectively around Kouya.

But the knife didn’t pierce her. Azusa warily stared at the knife floating inches in front of her. The next second, Tsukiharu’s body was yanked off the ground, slammed against a tree, flung thirty feet in the air and crashed back onto the ground where it cratered with such speed it seemed like an anvil dropped on him. He stopped moving.

“Eh?”

“Sorry,” Kouya whispered in her ear.

Azusa slowly turned her head. Color had returned to Kouya’s face. The gaping hole in his stomach left by Tsukiharu’s hand cleanly resealed. He looked as healthy as ever. The only difference was his eyes were dyed a very vibrant, glowing red. The red glow swayed like blazing flames and his eyes looked like they were the sunset locked in a marble. He stroked her wrist.

“It must have hurt.” After stroking the length of the cut several times it instantly healed.

“What did you just do?” Azusa asked, bewildered by her flesh repairing itself.

“You count as my kindred familiar now... I can do this much for you,” Kouya explained and slowly stood. He spotted the gory wounds on her shoulders and grimaced. He knelt beside her and gently stroked the cuts on her right shoulder. It only took a few times before the wounds healed, not even leaving a scar behind. The pain faded with it.

“Did you get this from protecting me?” he asked, a dark edge to his voice.

“Hm? Get what?”

“These cuts.”

“It’s not your fault, Kouya! You could say it’s my fault for butting in... Or more accurately, it’s my fault for saying a ton of stuff to tick Tsukiharu off.”

“Sorry. I’ll make it up to you later,” he said and abruptly yanked

the knife out of her left shoulder.

“OW!” Blood oozed from the hole left behind. The unceasing blood dyed Azusa’s clothes a deep red. Kouya put his lips to it. “Uh? Eh? Um, Kouya?!”

“What?” The cut on her left shoulder already healed by the time he lifted his face from it. It only took a few seconds. But it was long enough to dye Azusa’s cheeks red for a different reason.

“D-D-Did you just do it with your l-lips?!” she stammered.

“Wouldn’t it be a waste not to?” he answered like it was only obvious.

That’s right, this guy is a vampire. Azusa was finally forced to fully acknowledge what being a vampire meant. *Blood is like water and food to them. I guess that’d make it wasteful to let it spill everywhere. But wait a minute—*

“Kouya! Blood! You can drink blood? I know I’m in no position to ask that when I forced it down your throat, but still!”

“It was a do or die situation. I was able to get through it somehow.”

“Well yeah, when it comes down to survival.”

His body couldn’t continue its resistance to drinking blood when it was going to die without it. Drinking blood for vampires is the same as eating for humans. His body was abnormal for not drinking any until this point.

“I hope you can keep drinking blood then!”

“Your blood?” he countered.

Azusa was speechless. She wasn’t repulsed by him drinking her blood, but she had reservations about freely offering her blood. Most of all, she was embarrassed just imagining it. She witnessed Subaru and Ichi do it, but she was convinced their calmness over it came from them both being vampires—it was their custom.

“That’s...”

“I’m kidding.” Did Kouya just laugh after seeing her shifting expression? He covered his mouth as if he were coughing and turned his face away.

“You just laughed!”

“I didn’t laugh,” he stated with his usual lack of expression. Azusa got the sense he was actually a more expressive person than she gave him credit for. The momentary peace was shattered by Tsukiharuru slowly getting to his feet behind them.

Chapter 31: Contractor

A shadowy figure staggered to his feet and turned a cold eye on Azusa and Kouya.

"Ahh, this really turned into one sucky day. I can't believe the Akaoni drank Azusa's blood..."

Kouya swiftly hid Azusa behind him. But Tsukiharu turned on his heel, gesturing he was no longer interested in fighting them.

"I make a point of not fighting battles I can't win. I can't compete as I am with the Akaoni after he drank your blood... I won't be able to take you away with me anymore, so I'll leave for now and come up with another plan." Tsukiharu limply lifted his arm, his exhaustion evident.

"Shiro," he muttered. A gigantic snake slithered out of his shadow. The snake glimmered silver, its original color, under the blood coating its scales. Its right eye was grotesquely smashed in. "Let's go home."

"As you wish, Master Tsukiharu," the snake spoke with Shiro's voice. It gradually wrapped itself around Tsukiharu. The lower-half of his body sunk into the shadows with the snake.

"See you later, Azusa. I'll come for you again." Tsukiharu turned his head toward her, sadness tinged his smile as the ground sucked him in and he disappeared completely.

His absence brought silence to the forest. An owl's hoot echoed through the woods now that the forest had regained its nighttime stillness.

"...I take it that it's over?" Azusa asked.

"Yeah, probably."

Azusa collapsed weakly to her knees, the string of tension holding her together had been cut.

"C'mon," Kouya grunted.

"I'm so relieved..." She had been on edge nonstop the past few days. Relief brought tears to her eyes.

"You okay?"

"I'm glad everyone is safe. You guys said Ichi is in one piece too... Hold on, everyone?" Something nagged at her mind as she thought of everyone. Then it hit her. "Subaru!"

She had forgotten about Subaru! It wasn't hard to when a fierce battle broke out in front of her the moment he got blown away. Perhaps it was kind of late for her to worry, but she did nonetheless. She jumped to her feet and looked around. Trees spanned out in every direction and everything looked the same. She had no idea which direction she came from or where Subaru could be.

"I wonder if Subaru is okay."

"Azusa. You called?" someone said playfully behind her. Azusa spun around to find two people who hadn't been there before.

"Subaru! And—Ichi?! Why are you here?!"

"I'm sorry, Azusa. I inconvenienced you because of my weak-mind and disappointing failure," Ichi apologized.

"I couldn't care less about that! Are you all right?! Are you hurt anywhere? Is the poison out of your system?"

"Yes. There are no problems with my health."

"Thank goodness... I'm so glad, Ichi," Azusa said with a teary voice and hugged Ichi. Ichi stared at her in wonder, but softly returned her hug.

"I truly am sorry about what happened this time."

"It's fine! Don't worry about it! It seems like you were targeted because of me after all! I'm the one who is sorry, Ichi!"

"Please do not apologize to me, Azusa. There is not a single thing for you to fret or feel guilty over. Your being safe matters more than anything else."

"...Have I been forgotten here? I thought I worked pretty hard too. Well, he did get away from me before I could finish the job," Subaru cut into their girls only apology party.

"My apologies, Subaru."

"I'm sorry, Subaru."

Subaru laughed at their mirrored apology and turned his attention to Kouya. He froze when he noticed the vibrant red glow coming from Kouya's eyes.

"Hm?"

"What?"

"Kou, you drank blood, didn't you? Azusa's blood?"

"Yeah."

The blood drained from Subaru's face. "I have no idea how much you drank, but I'm impressed you didn't go on a rampage..."

"I was on the verge of death."

"You were?" The smile completely vanished from Subaru's face.

"What are you talking about?" Ichi asked Subaru. He averted his eyes from her and forced a smile that only touched his lips.

"In order to pin down Azusa's location, we went to plunder the blood sample they have on file at the lab..."

"Plunder?" Azusa interjected.

"Well, it's a precious and rare sample for the researchers. They weren't going to give it up, so we decided to take an aggressive approach—both physically and socially!" He flashed a wicked smile. Azusa took a step back.

"Everything went well until we got the blood. Then Kouya went

and drank it. He completely healed and was feeling great, until the abundance of power leftover caused him to go on a bit of a rampage...”

“He went on a rampage?” Azusa repeated.

“I stopped him with force! Only used physical force this time! The lab got half-destroyed, I was exhausted, and Kou was like a kid hopped up on a sugar rush. Or should I say a blood rush? Man, my life is over after this... I used the Shiranui name to get us into the lab, so they probably already contacted the family... Ugh, I wish I didn’t just remember about it. My future is bleak.” Subaru crouched and put his hands on his head in despair.

Kouya tossed in his indignant two-cents, “I said I was sorry more than—”

“Shut up! You can keep on apologizing for this one!”

“...Sorry.”

“Your face doesn’t look sorry! Say it again!”

“You’re too fussy.”

“That’s what you say as an apology?!”

“Now, now, Subaru. Please calm down. Your attempts at educating this sourpuss are pointless. Everything you do involving Kouya is wasted effort,” Ichi chimed in.

“Has my entire life and effort until this moment just been casually brushed under the carpet as a waste?” Subaru pouted.

Azusa burst out laughing at the back-and-forth exchange between them. They turned their attention toward her.

“Oh, sorry. Watching you, I couldn’t help feeling there’s not much difference between humans and vampires. I love the great childhood friend vibe you three have! I envy you!”

“...Then why don’t we change it to a group of four great friends vibe? We only recently got to know you Azusa, so we can’t give off the childhood friend vibe,” Subaru suggested.

“Huh?” Azusa squeaked.

“Let’s be great friends, Azusa!” Subaru exclaimed.

“I like being your friend, Azusa,” Ichi added in.

“...I’m up for that,” Kouya said.

Azusa’s cheeks flushed as they all smiled at her. She answered their fang-filled smiles with a broad grin. “I hope we can all get along as good friends!”

“OH yeah, Azusa, I meant to bring this up earlier, but I heard you gave Kou your blood when he was on the verge of death,” Subaru whispered next to Azusa on their way back to the mansion.

“Ah, yes, I did,” Azusa responded on the spur of the moment. She couldn’t come up with anything else to say. But Subaru was satisfied by her answer and smiled as he pat her on the head.

“Thank you for saving my best friend.”

“Pardon?”

“You know how he is. Most people get the wrong idea about him... He’s at fault too for taking their crap like it’s justified. His refusal to deny what they say lets them get carried away... In the end, he’s actually a nicer guy than most.”

“I agree.”

“.....”

Azusa looked up at Subaru who had fallen silent—his face stiffened with surprise. After a momentary pause, his expression softened.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“Nah, it’s just kind of amazing you could agree so easily with me.”

“Why?”

“Just goes to show how few people have been able to until now.”

“Really?”

“Really... So I hope you’ll continue to stick with him. I decided long ago to treasure anything he holds dear.”

“...I don’t really get what you are trying to say.”

“...It’s fine. You don’t have to get it now.”

“Okay?” Azusa tilted her head to the side. Kouya glanced back at them from where he was walking ahead with Ichi.

“I’ll leave you guys behind,” he stated curtly and turned away. Subaru suppressed a laugh at his best friend’s behavior.

“Well, to put it simply, I wanted to say I hope you’ll stick around and get along with Kou from now on as his contractor,” Subaru said with the most brilliant fanged-smirk of the day.

Chapter 32: The Price of Freedom

“**THERE** are many people who take on a relationship similar to marriage after contracting with each other, but there are equally as many who do not have any significant kind of relationship!”

“.....”

“Once contracted, you can determine each other’s location, increase natural healing, and manipulate each other’s bodies, inevitably increasing the amount of time you spend together! So it is only natural a lot of contracts between a man and woman lead to romantic relationships! But it is not like Subaru and I have such a relationship, and we are not telling you to develop a romantic relationship with Kouya either!”

“.....”

“So please open the door for me! Azusa!” Ichi’s desperate plea echoed through the mansion hallways. Azusa had locked herself in her room after they returned from the church incident—all because of Subaru’s nonchalant comment.

“Well, to put it simply, I wanted to say I hope you’ll stick around and get along with Kou from now on as his contractor.”

Azusa followed them home without a word. They arrived at the mansion where she stumbled silently into her room and refused to come out since. Once lunchtime came around the next day, Ichi noticed Azusa still hadn’t shown herself, leading to the current commotion. Ichi tried all sorts of things to urge her out of the room, but the rock-solid door showed no signs of opening.

“We aren’t telling you to contract with him! It is just that if you do, Kouya could detect where you are at all times, and we would be able to immediately run to your rescue if you are kidnapped again. Besides, I also thought this would allow you to do the things you want to do more freely, Azusa!”

“.....”

“We will not force you if you don’t want to! So please come out of your room!”

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

“...Azusa, please move aside if you are near the door. I am about to break it down,” Ichi warned in a deeper voice than usual. The door finally cracked open. Azusa didn’t like the idea of having her door broken down. Ichi wedged her foot in the opening to keep it from closing and flung it completely open.

“Ah!”

“Hello, Azusa.”

“H-Hi...”

“I don’t necessarily hate the idea of contracting with him, but I’ve been confused ever since I heard it’s the same as marriage to you guys... I’m sorry.”

“I will forgive you because you finally came out of your hole. The same as marriage, eh? Well, I cannot deny it because of the sheer amount of people who do become romantically involved... So? What do you plan to do?”

“Hmm... What’s Kouya’s take on this?”

“Let her do what she wants’, was the impression he gave. Kouya has never had a major need for blood, so he probably thinks it does not matter whether you become his contract partner or not.”

“I see...”

Azusa and Ichi locked themselves in Azusa’s room to mull things over. Akashi called Kouya and Subaru away to discuss their punishment for destroying half of the laboratory to get Azusa’s blood. As such, Ichi was set as Azusa’s primary bodyguard for the day. Despite Ichi’s part in Azusa’s abduction this time around, she was acquitted from punishment or blame thanks to Subaru speaking on her behalf.

“Freedom, huh?” Azusa muttered.

From what they told her, if she contracted with Kouya, there would no longer be a need for them to guard her 24/7, and she would be free to go into town as she pleased. Kouya and Ichi would remain on guard inside the mansion as before, but she wouldn’t be required to take someone with her everywhere she went anymore. A very appealing proposition. But she couldn’t easily accept it either.

“You should at least prepare yourself to have your blood sucked if you do contract with him. You may run into another situation like yesterday’s after all.”

“I don’t mind that part.”

“...You don’t?” Ichi asked surprised at how fast Azusa answered.

“Hm? Yeah. I was just thinking it’d be lonely... Dad joined the Red Coven’s research team now, so I only get to have dinner with him once every two days.”

“I heard about that. Mr. Saito apparently went to speak directly with Master Akashi. He asked if he could help with the research concerning making vampires human. Something about making the impossible possible to turn your blood back to human blood...”

“Yeah. I told him he didn’t have to, but he won’t listen to me. He

told me, 'it's so you can live in peace. Please understand.' I'm happy he feels that way, but still." Azusa smiled as she remembered her dad's determined smile and clenched fist when he told her his goals. "I feel like I'll really end up all alone if I don't see you, Kouya, and Subaru anymore. It's not like I have any friends here."

"Azusa..."

"...But I can't be selfish like this, right?" Azusa hung her head. Ichi felt like she could see floppy dog ears on her head. She smiled and gently squeezed Azusa's hand.

"If you are up for it, I would love to continue having dinner with you, Azusa! If you like, Subaru...might not be able to make it every day, but I will drag him and Kouya here whenever I can! Even if it greatly repulses me to do so!"

"You look repulsed just saying it... Are you sure though?"

"I was just thinking how lonely I would be too. Most of all, your cooking is delicious. I would be at a loss without it."

"Ichi! Thank you!" Azusa leaned forward with such vigor she nearly jumped into Ichi's lap. A radiant smile lit her face.

"Then, about Kouya—"

"Yeah, I will contract with Kouya if he wants to."

"Take this then." Ichi pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket. Azusa's face paled at what it said.

Chapter 33: Common Sense

“**HOW** did it come to this...” Azusa mumbled in the garden surrounding the mansion.

People, not flowers, spanned as far as the eye could see. Every single person wore a casual dress or suit. Azusa was no exception as she donned the pale scarlet dress prepared for her. White tables lined with light snacks and drinks were scattered about the vast garden and were the focal gathering point for people to chat while they ate appetizers.

Azusa went to the farthest edge of the garden to be a wallflower—far enough for her back to actually be against the mansion’s outer wall—but people still took turns coming up to greet her. Of course they would.

“Azusa, you are beautiful. I would expect no less of today’s star,” Ichi complimented.

“Once again, congratulations on your contract, Azusa,” Subaru congratulated.

The party was being held to celebrate Kouya and Azusa’s newly established contract.

“Ichi, Subaru, this isn’t what we discussed. No one told me I had to do this.”

“Er, this was Master Akashi’s suggestion when he heard about your contract... Sorry about this. I am seriously sorry,” Subaru frantically apologized upon seeing Azusa’s embittered expression.

“We originally planned on having it take place without making a scene, but we were incapable of refusing Master Akashi’s proposal... Please forgive me for not saving you from this nightmare. It is normal to throw a meager party like this whenever a new contract is made. You would do best not to let it bother you. Everyone just wants to drink and go wild,” Ichi cajoled.

“Yup, yup. The real reason for the party is for everyone to remember the faces of both contractors so they can keep an eye out that no one else drinks their blood without consent. The goal is a bit different this time though.”

“Both...contractors...you say? Then where the heck did the all-important other contractor go!” Azusa fumed.

The other star of the evening, Kouya Doumeki, was nowhere to be found. Ichi and Subaru exchanged wry smiles and shrugged.

“Kouya most likely will not come.”

“After all, Kou hates things like this. His coming of age ceremony was held without him too... I feel bad for you, Azusa, but you shouldn’t expect much from him today.”

"Even though he's more the star than some strange human girl like me?"

"Yeah."

"Indeed."

Their words put Azusa on the verge of tears. She didn't mind being greeted by vampires. But she despised the way they sized her up with their eyes. She was the infamous Akaoni's contractor and the contractor of the current Patriarch's son. The guests came to the party to see what amazing woman could land a contract with him, only to find an average little girl you could dig up anywhere. And she was human at that.

It's not hard to see why they would stare at me inquisitively. It makes sense, but still...

"I want to go home..." Azusa cried.

"Please endure for another two hours, Azusa."

"Ughh..." Azusa sighed. Ichi pat her on the shoulder.

"By the way, Azusa, did you take care of *that*?"

"....." Azusa quietly turned blue.

Ichi's face twitched. "Don't tell me you..."

"...Then don't ask."

"What on Earth are you doing?! Today is the last day! And to make matters worse, there is an extremely high chance you will not see Kouya today!"

"It's impossible for me! How could I get him to drink my blood one more time?!"

The paper Ichi gave Azusa the other day detailed the necessary steps to establish a contract. One sentence in particular bothered her.

"After the contractor drinks the contractee's blood once, they must wait twenty-four hours and then drink the contractee's blood within seven days."

"These are the steps required to create a kindred familiar, and is common sense among vampires... or rather instinctual to us, but I created this list to help you understand it," Ichi told her at the time, but her voice fell on deaf ears.

That conversation took place six days ago. Thus, today was the last chance to fully establish the contract between them by allowing Kouya to drink her blood for the second time.

"Didn't you say you did not mind having your blood sucked?!" Ichi shouted.

"Depending on the time and situation! I didn't think the next time would come so soon!" Azusa retorted.

"I understand you find it disagreeable, but if you miss your chance today, you will have to start the whole process over again! Meaning you will need your blood sucked two more times!"

"More than finding it disagreeable...I'm embarrassed!"

"Is it an embarrassing thing to do?"

"It is!"

Seeing Ichi's confusion reconfirmed Azusa's suspicion that humans and vampires felt differently about bloodsucking.

"...At any rate, Subaru and I will look for Kouya! Please stay here, Azusa! Let's go, Subaru!"

"Hmm. I don't think we need to go though."

"Quit complaining and start helping!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Azusa waved at Subaru as Ichi dragged him out of the garden by the collar. She sighed heavily once they were out of sight. She was swept back into the storm of greeting people and being the center of curious eyes. It was customary for the leading lady to wear a red dress, meaning everyone looked for the red dress as soon as they entered the venue.

Among the guests were people who were already drunk or out of sorts. All she had to do was listen and nod to their incoherent babbling to get them to happily go away, which actually made them more preferable.

One hour of greetings passed. The guests coming to greet her had grown sparse, allowing her to finally get her hands on something to drink. Downing an entire nonalcoholic cocktail in one gulp was less than elegant, but her mental exhaustion gave her little room to care about manners.

"You sure know how to drink, lass."

Azusa turned toward the owner of the rasping voice to find a red-faced middle-aged man cackling with a glass in his left hand. His plump figure and thinning hair was a wretched sight to behold.

"How do you do? I am Azusa Saito. I am deeply honored by you coming to join us at this party. I am still but an inexperienced child and would be greatly blessed if you could guide and encourage me in the years to come," Azusa mechanically repeated the same greeting she said for the nth time that day. She had rote memorized the cue cards Subaru prepared for her.

The plump man snorted. "Lass, that marks the second time I heard you say that. Try to at least remember the faces of the people who greeted you."

"Ah, I'm sorry."

The man somehow looked elated by her flustered apology. "Well, it's inevitable. Can't do much about it. You haven't done anything wrong, lassie. You had the great misfortune of being forced here against your will."

"U-Uh, okay," Azusa vaguely nodded along with him. He

smacked her shoulder hard enough to rattle her bones. The man laughed hard. Spittle flew out of his mouth as he took another heavy gulp of his whiskey.

"It's no different from your life having been sacrificed for appearances sake, huh! After all, it's abnormal for a vampire not to have a contractor at his age. No one in these parts would dare attempt to contract with the red-eyed lad. And if there was someone, they'd have to have balls of steal or be out of their mind. Our great Patriarch sure got some brains to kidnap someone from elsewhere because he couldn't dig up anybody locally!"

Everyone close enough to hear started muttering to each other.

All the adults who came to greet Azusa recognized her as, "the contractor Master Akashi forcefully brought from the human world for his son." What else would they think? Not a single thing about Azusa's blood or the battles surrounding her was made known. But this man was the first to voice it. Many of the guests whispered about it among themselves, but seeing as it could be taken as slighting the Patriarch, no one put what they thought into words.

The man paid no heed to the gathering eyes as he rattled on, "Have you met the red-eyed lad yet, lass? You were scared to death, weren't you? Did you faint?"

"No, I was fine, thank you," was all Azusa could say. Frightened by his intensity, she took a step back and her heel hit the wall. Staying in the corner to be a flower on the wall backfired on her now—she had nowhere to run.

"I see! What a gutsy lass you are!"

"Not at all."

He smacked her painfully on the shoulder again. She was certain he wasn't a bad man, but her complete lack of experience with drunks made him tough for her to deal with.

"Wasn't he despicable? Odious, sarcastic, reprehensible! He's got a scary mug, and his eyes could burn holes through you!"

"....."

Azusa didn't have the energy to skillfully parry his comments in her exhausted state. She couldn't stop from huffily grimacing. The man grinned like he understood where her expression came from.

"I'm right, aren't I? How could I be wrong? You obviously think so too, don't you?"

His grin snapped the last fiber holding Azusa's temper in check.

"Kouya is kind, you know? I believe his scarlet eyes are beautiful like rubies. I can't say much for the way he looks at you, but it's not bad once you get used to it. If you find him sarcastic and reprehensible, isn't that only because you have made him that way toward you?"

“Ooh?” the man hummed, impressed, and sidled up to Azusa. Azusa only realized her slip of tongue once she was stuck between the man and wall. Her hands shot up to cover her mouth, but there is no way to take back words once they are said. “You seem considerably attached to the red-eyed lad, lassie.”

“Nah, no...I mean, I’m sorry.”

“Nay, lassie. I’m the one who’s sorry! Looks like I misunderstood you!” he broadly grinned. The man’s voice suddenly took on a bright tone and he turned toward the guests throwing his arms out and loudly declared for all to hear, “Lass, you weren’t kidnapped, but actually pursued the red-eyed lad here because you love him, right? I’m sure that’s it!”

“What?!”

“What an extraordinarily commendable lassie you are! Our great Patriarch must have thrown this grand party because such a lass came for his son! I see! I see!” His booming voice, which seemed partially like an act, caused uproar among the guests. Azusa’s shock rendered her speechless.

“Looks like everyone else had the same misunderstanding as me! Come now, lassie, declare it to the lot of them! Shout it from the rooftops that, ‘I chased the red-eyed lad here!’”

“Excuse me?!”

The man pushed Azusa from behind as her face froze with an indescribable expression involving her gaping mouth. The guests chuckled at the banter between them.

“I guess the Patriarch wouldn’t kidnap someone.”

“But it’s hard to believe she’s in love with the Akaoni.”

Curious whispers came from the crowd. Apparently, their common understanding about Azusa changed from, “the contractor Master Akashi forcefully brought from the human world for his son” to “the strange girl who came to contract with the Akaoni.” On the whole, it had changed to a more favorable impression, but Azusa found it hard to swallow.

“Can you leave your teasing at that, Uncle?”

Azusa’s eyes widened at the person who pushed his way through the crowd.

“Kouya?!”

“Hiya, red-eyed lad. I was just having a fun little chat with your contractor.”

“.....”

The guests were abuzz for a different reason this time. The center of their attention was stiff-faced and held his left hand to his head. He was clearly beyond annoyed. He briskly cut through the crowd to where the man and Azusa were and snatched Azusa’s hand.

“I have business with her. I will greet you properly later.”

“Wow, someone can’t keep his hands to himself! You’re a passionate one, lad!”

It probably wasn’t Azusa’s imagination that she heard Kouya click his tongue.

“Kouy—”

“Let’s go.”

Azusa later told Ichi she had never seen a scarier face on Kouya than when he spoke to his Uncle that night.

Chapter 34: Contract

“**WHAT?** That man was Mr. Akashi’s younger brother? Not his older brother?”

“That’s what surprises you?” Kouya marveled, looking skeptically at Azusa.

Kouya had watched the entire exchange between Azusa and his uncle. She didn’t know how much he overheard, but considering his flustered appearance, he at least caught the part where his uncle started loudly addressing the guests. Azusa was mentally drained, but Kouya looked equally worn-out.

They were currently talking inside the log cabin Kouya brought her to when they reunited in the forest months ago. Walking to the cabin from the mansion made Azusa realize it was closer than she thought. They leisurely sipped at their coffee as they sat across from each other in the living room.

“I can’t deny my surprise at them being brothers, but I was personally more shocked that your uncle, who looks like he’s in his early fifties, is Mr. Akashi’s younger brother. Mr. Akashi looks like he’s in his thirties. His personality is the complete opposite from Mr. Akashi’s calm demeanor too...”

“I don’t know about Father, but Uncle’s mother was human. Vampire siblings tend to have different lifespans based on how powerful they are. As for personality, Uncle doesn’t normally act like that. He was putting on a performance. The Doumeki brothers are both sly old dogs.” Azusa cringed from the dark edge in Kouya’s voice. They were probably the bane of his existence.

“A-Are they? Why would he pretend to be a bad drunk though?”

“He probably was drunk. Well, he likely did it to protect his older brother’s, the Patriarch’s, honor and for...forget the other reason.” Kouya heaved a heavy sigh as if he just remembered something extremely displeasing.

Azusa spoke up cheerfully to pull Kouya out of his depression, “Either way, vampires are a species whose age you really can’t judge by appearances, huh! Oh, is it possible you are much older than you look too, Kouya?”

“...Are you curious?” Kouya asked after a short pause. His expression was the same as always, but he spoke with a teasing tone. Azusa leaned forward in her chair.

“I’m curious!”

“Then I’ll keep it to myself.”

“Hey! That’s mean! What’s wrong with telling me?”

“I’m older than you.”

“Well, duh! You look older as it is!” Azusa complained. Kouya sipped his coffee like he couldn’t care less.

Kouya looked like he was twenty-seven, which clearly made him older appearance-wise than Azusa who was actually seventeen. Azusa kept asking him, but he evasively sidestepped the answer every time, which had her give up on getting it out of him. She arbitrarily concluded he must be much older. She puffed out her cheeks to show her agitation, but her pouting had no effect on him.

“By the way, do you want to contract with me?” Kouya asked to reconfirm her intentions just as she took a sip of her second cup of coffee with pursed lips.

“Contract...”

“Want to do it? Or not?”

“...I want to.”

Azusa didn’t have many complaints about her current lifestyle, but it was considerably tiring to have someone stuck watching her 24/7. If it was possible to free herself from that constraint, she would do whatever it would take.

“Your hand.”

“What about it?”

“Hold it out.”

“Oh, okay.” Azusa put her right hand on his. He took her hand and bit her thumb. She heard the flesh pop as his fang sunk in.

“Ow!”

“...I’m done.”

She pulled her hand back from the pain. She promptly checked the palm of her hand, but a puncture wound was nowhere to be found.

“Just now—”

“The contract has been established between us now. If we were both vampires, you would need to drink my blood too, but seeing as you aren’t, we can skip that step.”

Kouya only drank a drop of her blood, but that counted as bloodsucking too. Azusa honestly found all of it quite anticlimactic. She was embarrassed over her foolishness for imagining him taking her into his arms and piercing his fangs into the nape of her neck in some epic Dracula movie scene.

“When it comes to humans, the act is closer to making you a kindred familiar than a contract partner.”

“What? I’m your kindred familiar now?”

“Officially, yeah. An actual contract system doesn’t naturally exist between vampires. We simply started calling the act of turning each other into kindred familiars a contract to keep up with modernization. This is what happens when one partner can’t make the

other their own kindred familiar.”

“That feels too one-sided. It’s not fair.”

“What can we do about it? Don’t worry, I don’t plan on treating you like a familiar.”

“I’m not particularly worried about that part of it.”

“You should be worried about that part,” Kouya advised with exasperation.

What the heck do you want me to do when you tell me not to worry one second and then tell me to worry the next! Azusa swallowed the words before they were out her mouth because she realized he said it out of worry for her.

“Please lend me your hand too, Kouya,” she said instead of complaining and snatched his hand before he could refuse. She mimicked what he did and bit down as hard as she could on his index finger.

“Hey,” he groaned.

“Everyone says my blood is vampiric, so I thought that might even up the playing field for us,” Azusa said, lifting her mouth from his finger for a moment to be faced with Kouya’s bewildered look. She ignored him and shoved his finger back in her mouth for another bite. But the natural difference in their canine teeth made it so she could only leave teeth marks on his finger without piercing through it.

“Hey!” he growled.

“Mm?” Azusa tilted her head with his finger still in her mouth. His finger popped out of her mouth. “Aw!”

Her eyes met Kouya’s, his brow furrowed more than usual. Was it just her imagination his ears were a little red?

“Don’t do something so immodest,” he grunted.

“Immodest?”

“Are you a child? ...Are you?” The first he said as a retort, the second he mumbled in resignation, confusing Azusa even more.

Kouya deliberately bit his index finger and pushed it inside Azusa’s mouth. The rusty iron taste of blood gradually spread across her tongue.

“You only need to get your saliva into the bloodstream so this will do,” Kouya explained, immediately pulling his finger from her mouth. Azusa’s mouth hung open at the suddenness of it, but her smile quickly returned.



“Then I will wait twenty-four hours and be back for my second bite within the week!”

“...Yeah,” Kouya grudgingly gave in to the predetermined decision.

“I look forward to being partners with you from now on, Kouya!” Azusa exclaimed with the most blinding smile of the day.

Chapter 35: School

AZUSA twirled in front of the cheval glass, her scarlet skirt and ribbon glittering under the fluorescent lights. She pulled her dark chocolate blazer on, covering the characteristic part of her uniform that imitated the corsets worn during the Victorian period.

“All right! Not a single piece seems to be out of place,” she commented with uncontained excitement. Today was the day she had been waiting for—Azusa was going to transfer to a local high school.

A month passed since they repelled Tsukiharu’s attack. What awaited Azusa after the contract with Kouya were long, boring days brought about by too much freedom and nothing to do. With the contract in place, Kouya didn’t have to stick around as much now that he always knew where she was. Not to mention her time with Subaru and Ichi drastically decreased.

Ichi came every day for dinner as promised, but Kouya only joined them once a week. A hectic schedule kept Subaru from coming since the first time the four of them had dinner together. The fun teatime she had with them almost every day before the contract was now reduced to a lonesome party of one.

The freedom gained in return for contracting with a vampire resulted in Azusa having too much time on her hands. She first complained about her tedium during dinner with Ichi a week ago.

“In that case, Azusa, why don’t you try attending school here? I have discussed the possibility with Subaru and Kouya. You previously expressed a desire to go back to school, correct?” Ichi asked in response to Azusa’s complaints.

The suggestion was undeniably tempting. According to Ichi, a vampire school imitating human school was built in the zone between the Red, Blue, and Yellow Coven towns. No one was required to attend school, but the majority of children from the three towns attended regardless of being from different Covens. The school was established with a curriculum in line with Japanese human school in order to raise vampire children capable of blending into human society.

“This vicinity only has one elevator school that goes from preschool to university. I hope you are all right with that. Also, as there were no students in the high school sophomore class for more than three months, you will have to attend the freshman class. Does that work for you?”

At that moment, Azusa thought she saw a goddess in Ichi. They immediately set about handling all the tedious procedures and now, one week later, Azusa was about to attend her first day of vampire

high school.

"I'm coming in." A reserved knock and familiar voice at the door brought Azusa out of her reverie.

"Oh, Kouya, come in."

Kouya opened the door and came inside, followed by a younger boy. Contrary to Kouya's ebony-black hair, the boy's tawny hair reflected a faint amber color in the morning sunlight. His large, round eyes brought out his youthfulness and were set against refined facial features.

Kouya possessed refined facial features as well, but while his face gave off the impression of a finely sharpened blade, the young man standing beside him had the gentle impression of the sun reflecting off morning dew.

"I'm Youta Doumeki. Thank you for always looking after my older brother. I'm attending school under Kisaragi, my mother's maiden name. Please feel free to call me either Kisaragi or Youta while at school."

His voice was deeper than expected, considering how his delicate looks could get him mistaken for a woman. His elegant smile was angelic. Charmed by his looks, Azusa needed a minute to register what he said.

"Older brother?"

"He's my younger brother—from another mother. He'll be your classmate starting today. You can rely on him if anything comes up at school," Kouya explained.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm sixteen, a year younger than you, but I hope we can be friends."

Wow, what a blinding smile this kid has. Even more so when you compare him to Kouya who rarely ever smiles. They're so different; it makes me doubt they're even brothers! Azusa thought as she shaded her eyes from Youta's sunny smile.

"There is still much I don't know yet, but I hope we can get along!" Azusa said and deeply bowed her head. Kouya poked her forehead.

"Let's go greet the headmaster and school office staff today. Are you heading to school now, Youta? If you are, we'll go with you."

"Hmm, I'm flattered by the chance to attend school with you, but I want to greet Ichi before I go. She's staying in this mansion, right?" Youta's cheeks faintly flushed. Kouya let out an exasperated sigh.

"I think she's still here, but don't let Subaru catch you."

"I won't. See you later, Kouya. See you at school, Azusa."

"Someone's in love. Spring comes early around here, huh?" Azusa couldn't help commenting after watching Youta wave goodbye and skip down the hallway toward Ichi's room.

“I’m surprised you could tell so quickly.”

“Something has got to be wrong with you if you couldn’t tell from the way he was acting.”

“Ichi hasn’t noticed yet though,” Kouya snorted.

“Ah, Ichi does seem like the dense type when it comes to this kind of stuff.” Azusa looked at Kouya with a wry smile just as he looked at her—their eyes locked. Azusa sucked in her breath, as did Kouya.

“Um...long time no see.”

“Yeah.”

The conversation suddenly took an awkward turn. Thinking back, Azusa realized it had been more than a week since they last saw each other. Moreover, there was no conversation between them during last week’s dinner. Whenever she tried to start one, all she got was, “Yeah” or “I see” in response. The evening was awkward enough Ichi had to mediate.

Kouya seemed to be avoiding Azusa since the day of the party. She tried to ask him what was wrong, and got the single line of, “don’t worry about it,” in reply. He didn’t avoid her when they were alone, but he was deliberately putting space between them when others were around. It had actually been about a month since they last held a real conversation.

“Let’s go.”

Kouya’s curt comment brought Azusa back to reality. Flustered, she quickly chased after his back as he left through the front door, and prayed their relationship would return to how it was before he started avoiding her.

Chapter 36: Conceited Pretense

“IT has been a while since we last met, Miss Azusa Saito. I believe the last time I saw you was at the party.” Azusa stared with disbelief at the hand belonging to the person speaking as she returned his handshake. A man donning an expensive and well-cherished suit directed a hearty smile at her and Kouya.

They arrived at the school more than an hour before class started to greet the headmaster. The front office secretary showed them into a sitting room where they were greeted by the well-built man who tormented Azusa as a terrible drunk during the party.

She froze for a good thirty seconds upon seeing a completely different man. And he even greeted her, changing what had been a possibility into reality in her mind.

“Shouldn’t you apologize to her first, Uncle?” Kouya said threateningly. The man cackled.

“Good point. I apologize for my rude behavior the other day. I wanted to see what kind of person could compel my nephew to suddenly establish a contract, seeing as he has always rejected the mere idea of one. Some bad rumors were circling about my elder brother too. Did I anger you with my improper behavior?”

Azusa assessed the man’s gentle expression and carefully chose her words, “Excuse me, are you the headmaster?”

“I am.”

“You are also the hammered drunkard who picked on me at the party?”

“Guilty as charged. I am the drunkard.”

“...I look forward to the years to come under your tutelage.”

“Yes, it will be a pleasure to have you as a student.”

Azusa’s face twitched, finally realizing what Kouya meant when he said his uncle and father were sly old foxes. He was the type you would never, *ever*, want to make an enemy of. The headmaster watched her reaction with amusement before placing a paper bag full of paperwork and her school ID on top of the table, bringing the conversation to an early close.

“Miss Saito, please head to the faculty room and have your homeroom teacher introduce you to your class. Kouya, stay here and chat with me.”

“Okay,” Azusa replied and picked up her student ID and the paper bag. Something tugged the paper bag downward as she tried to stand with it.

“Take only what you need today. I’ll bring the rest back to your room for you,” Kouya said.

“Why? This is pretty heavy, you know?”

“That’s why.”

“Th-Thank you very much!” Azusa broke out into a smile when she caught onto what Kouya was trying to do for her. After confirming her timetable for the day, she pulled the necessary textbooks out of the paper bag and shoved them into her messenger bag. She bowed and left the headmaster’s office.

As soon as Azusa left, the two men sitting across from each other fell silent. Kouya seemed ill at ease.

“From the look of things between you and Azusa, should I assume I was needlessly worried?” his uncle questioned, breaking the silence.

“You were worried?”

“I was. Yesterday the Shiranui’s daughter came to see me, you know? She stared me down and said, ‘Kouya seems to be avoiding Azusa now. Can you do something about it?’ I see her hatred of men hasn’t been cured yet.”

“...It hasn’t.”

“So? What has made you start avoiding the cute lass?”

“Because you...” Kouya started then held his tongue. Nothing good would come from saying it. The uncle sitting in front of him may have been the catalyst of the problem, but Kouya knew he was the cause. Blaming others was the same as barking up the wrong tree. He lightly shook his head.

“Are you possibly bothered by that rumor?” his uncle smiled, seeing right through Kouya’s thoughts, further ticking him off.

“Something would be wrong with me if I wasn’t bothered by it.”

“I presume it’s the rumor, ‘the infamous Akaoni has a yen for a human girl’? Rumors last but seventy-five days, my boy.”

Kouya clicked his tongue internally and glowered at the man sitting in front of him.

Kouya caused his own ruin by jumping out of the shadows to save Azusa from his uncle at the party. The infamous Akaoni, who rarely participated in events of any kind, saved a troubled girl from a drunk and vanished gallantly with her into the sunset. The women who personally witnessed the scene added color to their story as they gossiped about it the next few weeks. A young woman’s love for a good romance story was the same for humans and vampires alike. The rumor was promptly embellished and exaggerated as it made its way around the entire town.

Kouya predicted that would happen before he leapt out of the

shadows, but he couldn't abandon the distressed girl before him.

"Haah..."

"If you were going to let her fend for herself anyway, you should have neglected her until the very end. If I didn't know better, I would say you came to the party and hid in the shadows, watching over her out of worry."

"....." Kouya had no excuse—his uncle was right.

He was hesitant to thoughtlessly reveal himself in front of people who dreaded his red eyes, and had long since decided to never attend any event they would gather in droves. He could have attended with his eyes hidden behind colored contacts, but what the people feared were not *red eyes* as much as *Kouya Doumeki who possesses red eyes*. Hence, he rarely ever attended any event where he was the focus. No one had been troubled by his absence until now. But this time was different. By not attending the party to celebrate their contract, Kouya thrust everything on Azusa.

"Isn't it a good thing? As the rumor spreads, your horrible reputation will be slightly mitigated with the thought there is some humanity left in the Akaoni."

"All as you planned, I'm sure. Didn't you pull that move because you knew I was watching and couldn't leave her to your torment?"

"You picked up on that fast. What a blessing it is to be young. Your mind works fast."

"...I am happy you worry about my reputation, but will you please leave Azusa out of your schemes?"

"You call her Azusa, eh? Nice."

"....."

I seriously want to punch him in the face. I can probably win when it comes down to sheer strength. It'd be an overwhelming victory. I'm confident I can take him out in a few seconds. But Kouya kept his uncle's well-deserved beat down to his thoughts. *I lose my temper surprisingly easy when it comes to Azusa.*

"And so you are completely avoiding her until the rumors die down?"

"Yes, I am."

"What's the big problem? What's wrong with rumors of your loving her floating around?"

"I can't do that to her. There's no need—"

"There's no need to drag her down with my reputation,' is what you want to say, no?"

Kouya glared at his uncle for stealing his words, but his uncle couldn't care less.

"What's wrong with that? At most, they would just see the Akaoni as her backer and treat her like one would an infected, oozing

wound. Maybe they would fear her and bully her for it too. That's all though."

"How is that all?"

Girls her age had enough to deal with, without bullying and neglect added on top of it all. Thinking it would be his fault she'd be treated poorly made Kouya regret contracting with her. At least when everyone recognized her as Poor Girl A, forced to contract with him against her will, she could have been pitied and sympathized with. Kouya glared daggers at the man who erased any chance of her being the object of sympathy, replacing it with fear.

"That is a conceited pretense."

"....."

"Those are problems anyone who is unlucky will have to face if they live in a community. Whether rumors of your love for her existed or not, she would face some form of peer pressure. It's the students who decide how to overcome those obstacles and deal with life on their terms."

"That's—"

"Someone like you can't do anything about her life. You'd best not think a man such as yourself can influence someone else's life. Stop letting the way others perceive you control you and think about how to live your own life. You should live how you want to."

"....."

"Those are the words I wanted to tell you all those years ago when you were once my student," he flashed the smile of a clergyman.

This is why I can't stand Uncle, Kouya internally grumbled. He sighed with annoyance over how those simplistic words somehow lessened the load weighing on his heart.

Chapter 37: Self-introduction

“ALL right, class, I’ve got a transfer student to introduce to you. Miss Saito.”

“Hello. I’m Azusa Saito. I hope we can get along.”

The homeroom teacher, who looked more suited to being a PE teacher, brought Azusa to a normal classroom found anywhere in Japan. They weren’t kidding when they said the school was built to imitate human schools—not a single section of the school felt off from the ones she had attended.

The structure included an elementary school, middle school, and high school, with no separate class for each school year. Freshman through seniors all shared the same classroom, keeping things on a smaller scale. Being an elevator school with a university meant the campus grounds were larger than most. Each class had around thirty students, and Azusa currently stood next to the teacher’s podium at the center of all thirty students’ attention.

“Miss Saito is a genuine purebred human. A rarity in our ranks, but don’t tease her too much. Anyone have any questions?”

Having herself emphasized as a genuine purebred human really solidified the feeling she was surrounded by vampire children. Youta waved from his seat next to the window. They had only just met in the morning, but it was reassuring to have a familiar face in the room.

“I do! Are the rumors about Azusa being contracted with *the* Akaoni true?” a dumb-looking boy asked with his hand raised. The teacher turned blue and tried to stop him, but the mischievous boy didn’t get the message.

The teacher is more scared than he is, was the impression Azusa got.

“Y-You don’t have to answer him, Miss Saito!”

“Ah, it doesn’t bother me. It’s true,” Azusa readily answered.

The classroom exploded with chatter. The boys were brimming with curiosity about the being their parents threatened them into good behavior with. Some of the girls quivered with fear, while others weren’t interested in childish urban legends.

“I have a question! What is the Akaoni’s weakness?!” another boy asked.

“Hey!” the teacher frantically attempted to stop him.

“Weakness... His weakness, huh?” Azusa tilted her head in contemplation. One of the girls smacked the boy in the back of the head.

“Why did you ask something stupid like that! Some of us are scared here!”

“Because, I obviously want to try my hand at taking him out someday! Then I’ll be a legend!”

“Don’t be stupid!”

No matter the race or the era, men will be romanticists and women realists.

“It doesn’t really fall under a weakness, but while he might not look it, Kouya is a sweets fiend, and he will scowl at you real scary if you poke fun at him! ...Whoops, maybe I shouldn’t have said that...”

“Ooooh!”

The classroom filled with chatter, screams, cheers, and all sorts of noise.

“I don’t believe it. The Akaoni is dreaded as a fearsome monster, right?”

“But it seems like no mistake this girl is his contractor.”

“How scary. I just remembered when my mom used to tell me if I don’t go to bed, the Akaoni will come to get me!”

“My mother told me that too! She would say, ‘if you’re not a good girl, he will come peel the flesh off you!’”

What’s with that? Is he the boogeyman to these people? Azusa thought in dismay.

“He likes sweets? Does that mean he’s not actually very strong then?”

“What does that got to do with anything? I heard the Akaoni can blow away mountains! Don’t they also say he can split oceans in half?”

“Seriously, dude?! Sweet! I wonder if I’ll be like that when I awaken.”

“As if you could. Mo-ron! Wake up and smell the bloody bacon. Does he even actually exist? It’s rumored no one has seen him for decades, y’know?”

“Yeah... I’m kinda freaking out, but also got chills of excitement too! I want to meet him at least once!”

“You idiot. Don’t even try. They say he loves the blood of his kin the most, y’know? He’ll drain you dry!”

“You think so?”

The boys were half in awe and half afraid. At the end of all the exaggerating and embellishing of the rumors, Kouya got turned into one outrageous monster right out of a B-level horror movie, which Azusa found terribly sad. The greengrocer owner had informed her Kouya hadn’t shown himself in town in over twenty years. As such, none of her classmates had ever actually seen him in person. They merely feared the impression they got from their parents and grandparents. In other words, to them the Akaoni was closer to a fictional character than a person—an urban legend in every sense of

the word.

“Um, aren’t you afraid to be with the Akaoni?” timidly asked a meek girl sitting in the front row.

“I’m not afraid. Well, I do feel a considerable amount of fear when he gets angry though.”

“I knew it!”

“No, it’s not what you think. Aren’t you scared when your mom or dad gets mad? It’s like that.”

“Is...it?” The girl’s face paled and she looked down like she wasn’t convinced. Some people were genuinely afraid.

Azusa watched the class buzz with chatter over the Akaoni with a sense of detachment. She felt like she was introducing Kouya rather than herself.

“Here! I have a question!”

“Oh, come on! You’re the last then!” the teacher snapped and pointed to the boy. The teacher looked more fear stricken than the students.

“I heard from my parents, ‘the Akaoni has a yen for someone’, but what does that mean?”

“A yen for someone?”

What does that mean? Azusa tilted her head. The students who understood started muttering among themselves, but unfortunately, Azusa wasn’t the most intelligent of students.

“Sorry for being late,” someone said just as the door behind Azusa slid open. The voice sounded familiar.

“What’re you pulling on your first day? Miss Saito came here first thing in the morning!”

“I’m sorry. The paperwork took more time than I expected,” a boy said, stepping next to Azusa. She turned blue and froze.

“We’ve got another transfer student. His name is Tsukiharu Hiragi.”

“I’m Tsukiharu Hiragi. I look forward to getting to know all of you.”

Chapter 38: Classmate

“**THIS** hallway leads to the library. The separate building you can see from the window houses the cafeteria, also known as the dining hall. If you go straight down this hallway and enter the room at the end, you will be at the library. Students can borrow as many books as they like, but be sure to return the ones you are done with... I think that covers all the main places. Is there anywhere else the two of you would like to go?” Youta asked.

“I’m good. Thanks, Youta.”

“.....”

“Azusa?”

“Ah, it’s nothing! Don’t worry about me! Thank you, Youta!”

“Get your head out of the clouds, Azusa. You need to properly listen to Youta who has kindly taken time out of his afternoon to show us transfer students around the school,” Tsukiharu said and patted her on the shoulder. Azusa shuddered, getting him to whisper, “You’re cute when you’re scared, Azusa.”

I’m scared. I’m really scared. I felt like I was going to have a heart attack all day today. I want to go home as soon as physically possible! Azusa internally moaned.

Azusa went weak in the knees upon seeing who had transferred into the same class as her. Tsukiharu Hiragi—the boy who over a month ago had not only abducted and locked her up, but fought a gruesome battle against Kouya and had flung several knives at her. Just remembering that day caused her stabbed shoulder to throb—even though Kouya cleanly healed the wound without leaving any marks.

The second she saw him she wanted to run out of the classroom back to Kouya, but the classroom was full of students who knew nothing about what happened between them. Having deduced how unnatural it would be to dash out of the room like a madwoman, Azusa decided to wait for the school day to end. She waited and waited, every tick of the secondhand moving too slow for her racing heart.

Finally, homeroom ended, signaling the time for everyone to go home, when Youta called out to her.

“I was planning on showing Tsukiharu around. Would you like to join us, Azusa?”

Tsukiharu smirked as he ran his index finger across his neck behind Youta—a complete threat he was going to kill him. It was clearer than day that Youta would be Tsukiharu’s next victim if she left them alone together. It felt like she was leaving a sweet angel to

be victim to a wolf in sheep's clothing. Azusa wanted to cry. No, she was already sobbing internally.

And here they were now, touring the school.

"Wow, what an awesome sunset. Guess we should head home. I'll walk you home, Azusa. I've got stuff to do in the same direction," Youta offered.

"I'll head home too then. I was thinking about dropping by the CD shop on the way back. Do you know where a good one is, Youta?" Tsukiharu asked.

"It's in the same direction as Azusa's place, so let's go as far as the shop together!"

"Whaaaat?!" Azusa couldn't hold in her scream at Youta's careless invitation.

I thought I would finally be free of him too!

Tsukiharu pouted like a puppy abandoned in the rain. "Oh, I'm sorry. Would you rather be alone with Youta, Azusa? Am I the third wheel here?"

"....."

"What? Is that true? Did you not want Tsukiharu to come with us, Azusa?"

"...I never said that," Azusa answered mechanically.

She could have chosen to go home on her own, but there was no guarantee Youta would come back in one piece if she did. It would be hard to drag just Youta back with her without some sort of misunderstanding about her wanting to be romantically involved with him. While she had several choices, she really only had one.

She submissively walked the road home with the two boys.

Azusa clenched her aching shoulder as she walked beside Youta. The school gate was in sight. In other words, she was dead-exhausted before even getting off campus. She honestly doubted she could get home in one piece at this rate. She roughly rubbed at the tears welling from fear.

I can't cry because of this guy! She fiercely told herself.

Someone stood alone by the school gate. They were leaning against the wall as if they were waiting for someone. Black hair swayed in the wind. Their back was turned toward Azusa, but she couldn't mistake that silhouette.

"Kouya!"

"Oh, Kouya."

Azusa spontaneously ran for him. Kouya turned around in response to her voice and caught her when she leapt into his arms.

"What's wrong?"

"KOUYA! I was so scared!" Azusa said with her face buried in his chest. Kouya scowled at the nasal twinge in her voice.

“Are you crying?”

“I’m not crying.”

Bewildered, Kouya pat her head as she pushed her face deep into his shirt.

“There’s no reason for you to be so scared, now is there, Azusa?” Tsukiharu purred. Kouya’s gaze turned from Azusa and locked onto the boy casually strolling up to them. Kouya instantly pulled Azusa from his chest and hid her behind his back.

“Long time no see, Akaoni. Glad to see you’re well.”

“Why are *you* here?” Kouya snarled.

Youta finally caught up to Tsukiharu and stood beside him, looking curiously from him to his brother.

“Do you know Tsukiharu, Kouya?”

“Go home first, Youta,” Kouya warned.

“Why? I thought I could stop by and see Ichi—”

“Go to the mansion then. Just go on ahead, will you?”

“Ah, okay. Sure.” Youta reluctantly walked by them to return home alone.

Tsukiharu let out a slow laugh once he was out of sight. “Hmm, so Youta is the Akaoni’s little brother. I’ve benefited from befriending him.”

“I’ll ask you one last time... Why are you here?”

“I transferred to this school. From a human school. I wanted to become Azusa’s classmate.”

“What are you after?”

“The answer is obviously Azusa. I can’t snatch her away on a whim since she went and contracted with you, and you would be able to detect if I poisoned her, right? So, for now, I thought the best plan of action would be to become friends. Once I learned she was going to attend this school, I decided it would be fun to start by attending school together. Great plan, right?” Tsukiharu grinned. Kouya’s scowl only darkened.

“Too bad for you. Now that I know you’re here, she won’t be attending school anymore.”

“...I see. Too bad, indeed. I had hoped my new friend Youta and our other classmates would live longer.”

“...!”

“There’s no need for this school without Azusa, right?”

Kouya’s grip tightened on Azusa’s arm.

“You’d hate for them to all die too, wouldn’t you, Akaoni? Going to fight me then? In the middle of town? All the poor, innocent bystanders who would die in the process saddens me. But if that’s what you want.”

“.....”

“I’ll repeat this as many times as I need to: I’m a pacifist. If possible, I don’t want to hurt a soul. So let’s make a deal. I won’t harm a single hair on anyone’s head. Not even a scratch. Including you, Azusa. I won’t kidnap you or take you somewhere without consent. I honestly won’t do a thing. I swear. I promise not to hurt you mentally or physically in any way. In return, Azusa, become my classmate. I want to become good friends with you.”

“I refuse.”

“I’m not asking you, Akaoni. Azusa has the right to decide.”

“.....”

Tsukiharu grinned at Kouya’s soured expression.

Azusa raised her voice from behind Kouya’s protective back, “You really won’t do anything? You’ll just be a classmate?”

“Hey!”

“I’ll be just a classmate. I really won’t do anything.”

“And if I refuse?”

“You know the answer.”

“...!”

“You don’t have to listen to someone like him. We’ll handle anything he might try. Don’t worry,” Kouya said to convince Azusa, but she was thoughtfully looking down.

“I won’t tell you to decide now. You can give me your answer tomorrow. I’ll attend school as normal in the morning. Our deal will be set in stone if you show up to class. If you don’t come, I’ll obliterate the school and everyone in it. How’s that sound?” Tsukiharu casually walked toward Azusa and Kouya.

“See you at school tomorrow,” he said as he walked by them and headed home.

Chapter 39: Manifestation of Emotion

“NO.”

“But, Kouya—”

“I can’t agree.”

“Considering the situation, attending school is the best option—”

“I don’t mind tying you up, you know?”

“I hope you will spare me that much...”

An extremely disgruntled Kouya and a stumped Azusa faced each other as they fought a war of words. The digital clock read 8pm. They returned home to have a lively exchange of opinions in the mansion lounge without changing or eating dinner.

Azusa planned to accept Tsukiharu’s deal. Kouya wanted to stop her. They had hit a deadlock. Subaru and Ichi learned of the situation by being in the same room. They helplessly looked on as the other two argued in a world of their own.

“Think about it. Do you believe that guy will honestly keep his end of the deal?”

“But a bunch of people might be put through some terrible stuff if I don’t go. I’ll regret not going for the rest of my life if that happens! ...Besides, he might actually keep his promise and not do anything to me.”

“Can you seriously say that after what he did to you already?”

“For now...”

“I’ll tie you up.”

“Eek!”

His eyes were dead serious. He wasn’t smiling.

“Now, now, Kou. Chill out. You shouldn’t tell women you are going to tie them up. You’re not in bed with her,” Subaru interjected to help out, only to receive a face full of Kouya’s fist. Subaru, along with his chair, flipped several times before ending with him moaning on his back. Blinking away tears he dragged his chair back over.

“Your last sentence was unnecessary,” Kouya growled.

“You deserved that one, Subaru,” Ichi icily approved.

Subaru rubbed his swollen face and brought things back on topic with teary eyes, “...Well, all jokes aside, the real question is: what are you actually going to do?”

“Subaru and I will subdue the kid tomorrow. You don’t need to come,” Kouya ordered as if it were already set in stone.

Azusa frowned with annoyance over how he took control. She felt as if she were being treated like a nuisance. Of course, she knew he was trying to protect her. But this was her problem too. If anything, it was her problem and hers alone. It seemed weird for her

to be the one left out.

"You need to make sure no one gets hurt. Can you do that?" she asked.

"...I can—"

"Not happening. At least some casualties will come from it," Subaru said, cutting off Kouya. Kouya glared at him, but Subaru ignored him with a devil-may-care attitude.

"In the first place, he's an anomaly. I asked Master Akashi, but he didn't know anything about the research into the Ancient's body or about Tsukiharuru Hiragi. He's currently got a team looking into it, but it's not like they'll get the results anytime soon. If we take what he said at face value, his power level is on par with Kouya—or higher—even though he's in a pre-awakened state. Were they to go all out against each other, the resulting damage would be enormous. Even if we successfully get everyone out of the school, the damage would likely extend to the surrounding homes."

"....." Kouya averted his eyes at Subaru's calm deduction of the situation. He knew some degree of victims couldn't be avoided.

"What do the two of you think is the best course of action?" Azusa asked Ichi and Subaru.

"...I think believing that Tsukiharuru guy will keep his promise is the method most likely to avoid widespread mayhem."

"Subaru!" Kouya snarled.

"It's not like I want her to go either, but that's the best choice to keep casualties to a minimum. Right now we're only dealing with the Tsukiharuru kid, but imagine what will happen if that viper Shiro joins him in the fight against us. The two of us alone can't stand up against them and protect people. We can't even gather people in time before school tomorrow. Even if we were capable of rallying some people, if they aren't strong enough, it'll be like sending a lamb to the slaughter. Let's not forget Azusa's blood is a highly classified secret. Only some of the highest ranked nobles know about it aside from us. We can't get people to help even if we wanted to."

Subaru's reasoning was sound. Azusa felt it gave her the push she needed.

"What about you, Ichi?"

"...I do not want you to go, but I am of the same opinion as Subaru... I'm sorry, Azusa," Ichi answered, looking down.

Azusa shook her head and spoke with forced cheer, "Thank you. I'm okay! I'll run away if anything happens, and I actually wanted to keep attending school! It's so agonizing to be bored out of my mind every day!"

"Azusa..."

"Nothing happened today either. It went by surprisingly

normally. I was just thinking how much I would love to enjoy my long-awaited high school life again—as long as that guy behaves.”

Kouya loudly clicked his tongue. Azusa looked up—his ruby-like eyes glowed a deeper, more sinister red than usual. His eyes narrowed with utter disgust before he averted them from her. He turned on his heel and left the lounge without another word.

BANG! A loud crash came from the hallway. Azusa wondered what happened as Subaru ran out of the room with an exasperated look.

“Dude, don’t take it out on the furniture. Or the walls. Or the floor! Or MEEEEEE!” Subaru’s flustered voice could be heard along with several more crashes.

“...Kouya,” Azusa whispered.

“**THIS** is it, right? Kouya’s room.” Azusa stood motionlessly in front of the room given to Kouya inside the mansion. A dinner tray rested in her hands.

Since their argument, Kouya skipped dinner and refused to come out of his room. Subaru was supposed to bring him dinner, but Azusa took it on out of a desire to apologize. The servants were wary of Kouya and kept their distance, which eliminated them candidates to bring him food. Azusa arrived at his door, but couldn’t bring herself to knock.

How do I apologize to him? What is there for me to even apologize for? Sure, I angered him, but that doesn’t mean I can choose not to attend school now. So what do I say to him then? I want to apologize, but I can’t. Azusa paced restlessly in front of his door, mulling over what to do.

“...You aren’t coming in?” Kouya’s voice came from the other side of the door. The door slowly opened, revealing Kouya with his trademark expressionless face. “What were you doing in front of my door for ten minutes?”

“You noticed?”

“...What do you think we contracted for?”

Oh yeah, I forgot contractors can detect where each other are, Azusa now remembered.

“I brought you dinner.” She held up the tray of chilled food. Kouya quietly stepped back from the door.

Did that mean she could come in? She could have just handed it to him at the doorway, but she genially entered the room because she wanted to talk to him.

The room was tidy and organized—it didn’t seem lived in. If Azusa’s room was once a noble’s guest room, Kouya’s must have been

a spacious study or reading room at one point. All the furniture was made of the same black oak, giving the room a dim and gloomy aura.

"Where should I put it?"

"On the table is fine."

She knelt down to put the tray on a low table in the center of the room and heard the squeak of springs behind her. She looked over her shoulder to find Kouya had sat back in a large, leather upholstered chair with gnarly wood armrests. She was mistaken to assume he lacked expression when she came into the room—his face clearly revealed his soured mood now.

"Um, I'm sorry."

"About what?" Kouya grunted in a low voice.

"Uh, about earlier. You were only worried for me and I acted that way..."

"Did you change your mind?" he asked. Azusa slowly shook her head.

"...I plan on attending school tomorrow. I can't sit still and do nothing when I know people will get hurt because of me."

"Even though you were so scared you cried today? What part of the day *'went by surprisingly normally'* for you?"

Azusa sucked in her breath. The conversation with Tsukiharuru consumed her thoughts to the point she completely forgot she had clung to Kouya's chest and let him wipe away her tears. Fear had enveloped every fiber of her being that she thought nothing of it at the time, but thinking back on it turned her cheeks a deep red.

"I did not cry."

"You did too," he instantly retorted. She had nothing to counter with, because she really did cry.

"By the way, what were you doing there?"

The school was in the center of town. Azusa wondered why he had been at the school gates when he rarely ventured into town.

Exasperation filled his face as he sighed, "...I thought it was obvious I was there to pick you up."

"You were?"

"While we're on the subject, I'll continue dropping you off and picking you up from school. If you plan on going tomorrow, interact with him as little as possible. And be smart about it. Keep conversations to a bare minimum. I'll let you go if you can do that."

"Let me go? ...You know, I've been thinking this for a while, but while you're normally a man of few words, you've got quite the temper and a wicked tongue on you, don't you?"

"Huh?"

"Also, you're a bully and click your tongue at the slightest annoyance."

“.....”

“But more than anything else, you are incredibly kind.”

Kouya looked like someone who was just shot in the face with a spitball. His forehead wrinkled over how to take her comment.

“Thank you very much. I would be happy to have you escort me to and from school. I may have acted brave with Ichi, but I really am scared... I’m pathetic, aren’t I? That’s why it would really reassure me to have you with me.”

“I see.”

“I have to pump myself up to handle things tomorrow! Ah, I’m sorry, I’ve been rattling on about myself. I’ll go back to my room now,” Azusa said, opening the door to leave. Kouya grabbed her hand. She looked over her shoulder at him.

“Call me anytime you need me. I’ll make sure I’m able to go and save you at any time... Thanks for bringing dinner.” Kouya pat her on the head, perhaps as a sign of his gratitude, and let go of her hand.

Azusa felt the heat rise to her cheeks the moment the door shut behind her.

“It’s kinda hot... Did I catch a cold?” Azusa fanned her face with her hand and walked down the hallway to her room.

Now that I think about it, Kouya stopped avoiding me... Azusa tilted her head in puzzlement over the bubbly feeling rising in her—it was the first time she had ever felt this way.

Chapter 40: His Own World

Kouya's POV

MOTHER was my entire world as a child.

By the time I became self-aware, only two types of people were around me: those who feared and scorned my red eyes, and those who tried to use me because of them. A curious gawker occasionally turned up, but in due time they'd make their disgust known. Maybe it was conditioning from what others said around them or threats from their parents to stay away from me that had everyone eventually turn on me.

When did I stop feeling anything as the people who cheerfully spoke to me disappeared one-by-one? Thinking back, by the time I was five I had already gained an understanding that people will always abandon you for their own good, and I developed a general sense of the way others viewed me.

A red-eyed abomination.

That was how others perceived me, even as a child.

It's not as if I had done anything at that point. I just happened to be born with red eyes. I didn't despair over my future enough to curse my lot in life, but I had no expectation for a happy life either. That was my childhood. Amid all the contempt that tried to devour me from every direction, only Mother loved me. Her love fit what you would expect of any mother. At times she would scold me, praise me, cry with me, and rejoice with me.

Akashi bestowed a log cabin in the woods near town to us. I spent untroubled days there with Mother. That was the entire world to me.

Mother had a weak constitution and wasn't very strong as a vampire either. I put my heart into nursing her back to health every time she fell ill. My father, Akashi, would show his face at our cabin once a month, but we didn't share anything that could be considered a conversation, much less heart-to-heart father-son time.

"How are you, my boy?"

"Don't fight with others."

I remember nodding to his one-liners every month. I recognized him as my father, but his position as Patriarch held a stronger image, causing me to hesitate becoming overly familiar with him.

My world didn't grow even after I began attending school.

Rather, it seemed to shrink. Not a single person in the same class tried to talk to me. When the need arose for me to approach them, conversation was all but impossible—they were paralyzed with fear. Some of my bolder classmates tried to pick on me every so often, but when I snapped and paid them back for it, they became like disciplined pups the next day.

You could come at me more, was my honest thought. It was far better to be pranked and bullied than to be ignored and treated like I didn't exist.

Change came to my closed-off world the fall of my tenth year. A boy two years older than me, claiming to be my older brother, forced a letter of challenge into my hands. I listened to what he had to say, to learn we were brothers from different mothers and that he came to challenge me to a fight to see who was the strongest of all our brothers. He also claimed I was the third he had challenged so far, and that he had beaten the pulp out of the first two.

I was surprised to say the least. I learned I had siblings for the first time. Most of all, I was astonished one of those brothers not only didn't quiver in repulsion and fear of my eyes, but even wanted to challenge me to a fight. Naturally, I properly accepted his challenge and secured my win.

He said his name was Tomoki. He was a lively boy who often smiled. He was my first friend and my older brother.

From that day, my world rearranged itself to include Mother and Tomoki.

Tomoki came to the log cabin to challenge me every time the opportunity presented itself. I asked him why he so desperately wanted to win, to which he responded with a sparkle in his eye, "I want to take over the position of Patriarch after Father!"

His mother wanted him to become Patriarch.

We brawled, laughed, and played together—that's what the days with Tomoki consisted of. It was fun. Above all else, I was having fun. I learned for the first time how much fun spending time with others could be.

Just like that, a year passed by and I became best friends with Tomoki. I spent the majority of that year hanging out with him. And then another year went by. We both grew a little taller, our personalities settled to fit our age, and while we no longer laughed with our mouths wide-open without a care in the world, we still had a great relationship.

Tomoki also stopped bringing up our challenge every waking second. And while he never once stopped talking about his desire to become Patriarch, he started speaking about it as a pipe dream. His mother grew hysterical and started coming to my house to complain

around that time. Whenever Tomoki and I would study at the log cabin, we often heard her deranged shouts of, “You took him! You took my son!”

At first, I went to help my mother until she remonstrated me saying, “This is a problem among us women.” From that point, I hesitated to go downstairs anymore and just sat on top of the second-story staircase listening to his mother’s crazed hysteric raging.

Tomoki’s trips to our house decreased in proportion to his mother’s escalating hysteria. After half a year of his mother’s hysteric attacks, he stopped coming to the cabin altogether. It was quiet. Things only returned to the way they were before he came into my life, but the silence enraged me. I went on a rampage at school during that time. Tomoki had just turned fifteen and I, thirteen.

And then that fated day came.

My siblings and our mothers had suddenly been summoned to the Patriarch’s manor. I saw my siblings for the first time there. There were five altogether—four boys and one girl. Of course, Tomoki sat obediently in the room too. He had taken on a slightly more mature and anguished look in the several months since I last saw him.

We were gathered under the pretext of an informal social gathering to get to know each other better. We were to eat and stay the night together. That was all. I thought Akashi had a few screws loose to gather all his lovers in one place, but I was convinced it might help temper Tomoki’s mother’s hysterics with how happy she was to see Akashi.

Tomoki called me out to see him that night.

He stared absently at the moon in the manor’s garden. The night was graced with an almost chillingly beautiful moon.

A little excited to see him, I called out his name and ran toward him. I gasped at what I saw glinting in his hand. I still vividly remember the expression on his face and the sound of his voice.

“Let’s fight, Kouya.” The gloomy-eyed Tomoki looked as if he were on the verge of tears. A silver knife gleamed in his right hand.

The knife was made of the purest silver from the blade to the handle. Tomoki’s hand sizzled loudly and burned where he held it. The smell of burning flesh and a grim Tomoki slowly approached me. I was paralyzed by my first taste of genuine killer intent directed toward me.

I couldn’t swallow the situation. Everything that happened from there seemed to play out in slow motion. Tomoki ran at me with the knife. I watched him without doing anything. For a moment, I didn’t recognize the shadow that leapt between us.

Mother was stabbed protecting me.

To put it simply, that’s what happened. He had thrust the knife

through Mother's heart. The flesh surrounding the silver knife instantly seethed and exploded in a bloody mess. Mother collapsed and Tomoki stood before me bathed in her blood. His shaking hand still clenched the knife.

"It's all your fault. All your fault. All your fault," he repeated through clattering teeth. His voice sounded so distant.

I don't really remember what happened next.

Tomoki laid sprawled out in the pool of blood gushing from Mother. A gaping hole replaced where his heart had been, and my right hand was dyed a dark red. I finally realized what was going on and the gravity of what I had done; I lost my mind.

"Mom never loved me because you were born with red eyes and received the name Kouya... It's all your fault. Wretched monster," he cried out with his final breath.

Tomoki's last words were a curse. He choked on the words, but clearly got them out. The boy I considered my dear friend and beloved older brother, cursed me as a monster in his final moments.

I think I cried. As long as my blood isn't transparent, I believe the liquid that spilled from my eyes were tears. I resented my existence for the first time. If gouging out my eyes meant I could redo everything, I would gladly rip them out of their sockets. But reality is hopelessly cruel...

Mother died.

I killed Tomoki.

I heard the sound of my world collapsing around me.

MY consciousness suddenly snapped awake. I was a little perplexed by the ceiling I looked up at.

Where am I?

I sat up in the leather chair and confirmed my surroundings. My mind finally caught up to what was going on.

"Why did I dream of something from years ago?" I grumbled to myself.

A sigh naturally slipped out as I endured the desire to crouch on the ground. Pathetic. My eyes just so happened to rest on the tray of food left on the low table in the middle of the room. The food Azusa left for me hours ago long had turned cold.

I moved over to the sofa and snatched up one of the sandwiches. Azusa probably prepared a lighter meal for me thinking it would be easier to eat.

Considerate women are the best, I casually thought before pushing back my hair.

“What am I thinking, calling her a woman?”

I told myself there's no way I could acknowledge the girl I've known since she was four as a woman.

Am I being influenced by the weird rumors floating around about us?
I wondered.

I think I've been out of it lately.

She always does things that take me by surprise. She always smiles happily by my side and touches me without freaking out. She angrily yelled that she's not scared of me and described these disturbing eyes as rubies. I know I should warn her off and fix the lack of sensibility she's had since she was four, but I still can't bring myself to do that.

Even Subaru, even Ichi, and even Youta, trembled in fear the first time they saw my eyes. But she never has. I'd probably never recover if the day came when she'd shrink back in fear of my eyes. I don't care if the world fears me. I just couldn't bear it if she did.

Just three people. Of all the people I have ever met, only three people didn't fear my eyes.

Among those three, two are long dead. I feel like my dream was a warning not to get ahead of myself. My own subconscious, and no one else, was advising me not to be happy.

Chapter 41: Midnight Assault

Kouya's POV

I showered with cold water. I wanted it to wake me up, but I also needed it to calm down. I felt sick to my stomach as memories drudged up by the dream haunted my every waking moment. The tears don't come anymore. I told myself it happened years ago and tried to push it down without lingering on it. That's how I've always handled it.

I got out of the shower slightly more refreshed than before and returned to my allotted room.

"Kouya," someone called behind me just as I placed my hand on the doorknob. I looked over my shoulder a little surprised. I could tell who it was just by her voice.

"What time do you think it is right now?" I said brusquely.

"Ahaha..." Azusa laughed awkwardly. She held up two coffee cups and faintly smiled as she asked, "Will you drink with me?"

It was already past 1 a.m. I opened the door and stood aside for her to come in.

"Pardon my intrusion," she said and sat on the couch in my room. I sat beside her, leaving a gap between us.

"What a relief. Ichi is already out cold and I didn't want to wake her. I was wandering around wondering what to do when I spotted you."

"Are you always up this late?"

"Hardly! I'm usually long asleep by this time," Azusa said before her face tightened with regret over letting that slip.

"You couldn't sleep?"

"Ahaha...pathetic, right? Maybe I had too much coffee." She forced a halfhearted smile and sipped at the corner of her coffee cup with her face turned away from me. An egregious amount of hot milk filled her cup to the brim. The cup she placed in front of me had hot milk in it as well.

"You don't have to go if you're scared," I said in a low snarl that took even me by surprise.

"Are you angry?"

"....." I had no reply. I figured there was no point in affirming or denying it—my attitude spoke volumes.

"I figured as much... I'm sorry."

Her apology was probably how she felt about not going along with my wishes. I could feel the wrinkles in my brow deepening into a scowl.

I feel sick. And I just cooled down in the shower too... My feelings were spinning in a futile circle. I wanted to protect her, but the situation and her refusal to let me protect her further incited my frustration. I feared I might use all my strength to crush that Tsukiharuru guy the next time I saw him.

And then it suddenly occurred to me to wonder what it is I'm so annoyed about. *Sure, I won't deny I see Azusa differently from others as I've known her since she was four. I even thought I would keep an eye out for her more than the kids in our Coven. Protecting her and staying with her all the time are my orders; my personal feelings should have nothing to do with it. Strange. If that's the case, why am I so annoyed?*

When Tsukiharuru first kidnapped her, the orders from above were to abandon her. And yet I ignored Subaru's attempts to stop me and charged in to save her. Why did I do that?

I forced myself to stop thinking about it. I got the feeling I would be better off not setting foot into that realm of thought.

"Are you all right? Are you tired? It is pretty late."

I don't know how she interpreted my behavior, but I spotted her peering at me with concern. I lifted my head to better face her.

"I'm fine. You should sleep after you finish your drink. This isn't a good time for children to be awake."

"I will be eighteen soon, you know? I'm almost an adult! How long do you plan on staying up, Kouya?"

"I usually stay up until about three," I responded with an air of what-does-that-matter.

Azusa grinned. "Is it okay for me to stay here until then?"

"Huh?"

"I doubt I'll be getting any sleep tonight."

"....."

I could almost see the question marks floating over my head.

What is this girl saying? I mean, it's strange enough for a girl to visit a man's room late at night—I don't get why she would plan on staying until I fall asleep. I felt like questioning the kind of education her father gave her about men.

"Can't I?"

"You can't." It took everything I had to give that much of a response. Azusa puffed out her cheeks and clung to the couch's armrest as if to emphasize she wouldn't move unless I dragged her away by force.

For argument's sake, I swear it's fine with me if she doesn't particularly view me as a man. What concerns me is if she acts this

way with other men. I'm not well-versed in the modern sense of virtue, but I think she's not acting appropriately for a woman her age.

"Don't blame me if you get ravished then." *By other men*, is what I meant when I said it. But she didn't seem to take it that way. She froze for a moment before turning bright red as if all the blood in her body flooded her face.

"Uh, r-ravished—"

"Not by me. By other men. You are of age, so try to be more modest and proper," I quickly revised my prior statement. Azusa's stiffened muscles relaxed as she sighed with relief.

"Y-You make a valid point. Oh, but there is no need to worry about that! I won't do it with anyone else!"

"...I see."

Should I be happy about that?

"I understand what you are trying to say. I will be careful around other men! Oh, but, it's okay if I act like this with you, right? In which case, please allow me to stay with you until you fall asleep!"

"....."

She doesn't understand at all. I sighed. I leaned back against the couch and gazed up at the ceiling. My head hurt—in the mental sense.

"Are you all right? Do you feel sick? Oh! Are you in need of blood?" Azusa asked, coming to the wrong conclusion, and swiftly closed the space between us.

I wanted to sigh as the flowery scent of her soap tickled my nose. I did tell her to only be careful of other men, but I never said not to see me as one too. Does she lack common sense?

"Um..."

"....."

"...W-Want a drink?"

I glanced at the red-faced Azusa shyly exposing her neck to me—I lost my self-control. I scooped both her legs up and pushed her down on the couch. I grabbed both her wrists and secured them so she couldn't escape. She was surprised by the sudden turn of events, and trembled as the blood flushed every inch of her delicate white skin a tempting red.

"You're adorable."

"...What?"

The words came naturally from me—even I was shocked. Her not hearing me was my only saving grace. I'm embarrassed. What the heck did I just say?

"Will you let me have a drink?" I growled deeply to gain control of the situation.

You should run in fear of me now. You should learn firsthand from this experience to never allow yourself to be this defenseless and inviting.

That was my genius plan.

“...Go ahead.”

“.....”

What should I do? was my first thought.

Chapter 42: Dawn Break

Kouya's POV

“.....”

“.....”

Several minutes quickly flew by as we both stared at each other unsure of what to do next. Keeping her pushed beneath me on the couch in an embarrassing pose wasn't going to be good for either of us mentally. I twisted a little to pull back from her without crushing her beneath me.

“...!”

I have no idea how my movement came across to her—she squeezed her eyes shut with firm resignation. She turned her head to expose her neck and flattened her lips in a straight line. Seeing her tremble with fear made me want to punch myself. What good would come of scaring her this much?

“...Sorry. It was a joke,” I said, sitting up. I helped Azusa to her former sitting position. I got up and sat down in the leather upholstered chair on the other side of the room. She shouldn't be scared if I stay this far away.

“You don't need to drink?”

“I'm good.”

“Is your health okay?”

“I'm as healthy as can be.”

“Then what was that about just now?”

“...It was a joke,” I said, thinking I'd have to be out of my mind to tell her the truth. Of course, I was prepared to be berated for angering her.

What I received instead was her relief-filled voice, “Thank goodness. I'm glad you aren't sick. I heard from Ichi that all vampires will be in a crisis when they don't have blood, so I was worried you had fallen ill because you needed blood. I did contract with you even though I may not be the best person for the role—I am prepared for you to drink my blood when necessary, so please tell me whenever the time comes! Oh, wait, should I have asked if your impulse to drink blood has returned first?”

She really should get her head checked for being kindhearted to a fault. *With how scared she was, her ability to internally worry about someone other than herself makes my head ache. It's not like I'm starved to*

the point of forcefully taking someone's blood nor do I get any kicks from that kind of sick pastime.

"I'll think about it."

She gave a satisfied nod in response to my short brush off.

That time will likely never come. I did just fine my entire life until now. I should be fine without blood from now on too, I thought then shook my head to get rid of the feeling I wasted a good opportunity.

"Now that I think about it, have you never had a drop of blood until you drank mine?" Azusa suddenly asked.

I'm at a loss on how to answer her. I've got my reservations on telling her the truth, but lying isn't in my character either. I mulled over both options and decided to go with the former.

"I've drank before. Right before my coming of age ceremony."

"Coming of age ceremony?"

"Yeah, put simply, the day we make our first contract. I've already told you how vampires awaken around their twenties, right? One or two years before that, those of us whose bodies are almost completely vampire will contract with a partner chosen for us in advance. As you know, we must drink the other person's blood on two separate occasions to establish the contract. We drink the blood once two or three days before the ceremony, and once more on the day of it to fully establish the contract. I skipped the second time, but I did drink the first time."

"Was the other person your lover then, Kouya?"

"Leina? Fat chance," I snorted remembering the woman who was the epitome of a snarky priss. She was the type who drained the life out of you just by being in the room.

"But they say men and women who contract get romantically involved and whatnot..."

"Ah, that? Our first contract is just a temporary holder until either side finds a better partner. Some people do end up getting married to their first partner, but a lot don't. Depends on the pair, really. Incidentally, the contract will dissolve itself in time if you don't drink their blood for a while, making it easy to break off."

"I see..." Azusa responded in a voice sounding both relieved and disappointed. I scratched my head.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I'm feeling kinda...strange is all..."

"Are you the one who's sick tonight?" I asked and walked over to her, putting my hand on her forehead. It was a little on the warm side, but probably a normal human temperature. "You seem okay for now, but you should give it a rest for tonight and return to your room if you don't feel good."

"I don't want to!"

“Flaunting about however you wish right after what I did to you...” I grumbled.

“What? Did you do something terrible to me?”

I clicked my tongue before I could stop myself. I don’t believe I’m in the wrong about this one. Azusa cringed at the sound and drew back from me.

“I’m worried about tomorrow! Please let me stay just this once!”

“...Why does it have to be me?” I said, implying she should go smack Ichi awake.

“Fine, I’ll go to Subaru’s room then. He might still be up.”

Her logic made no sense, so I stopped her. I pushed her back in her seat with such speed even I was taken by surprise.

“.....”

“.....”

“...On one condition. Tell me about yourself. You can stay only as long as you’re talking.”

“Okay!”

Good answer.

Azusa happily went on about what kind of teachers and friends she had at her old school. Unlike mine, her school life was normal and pleasant, which made me envious while at the same time I felt like I was experiencing everything through her colorful stories. It also reminded me I was the one who ripped that life away from her.

In her stories, Azusa was just as strong, cheerful, and a little weird as she is now. I got a different impression hearing about it directly from her than I did from the biannual reports from my spy.

I’m glad I asked her to tell me about herself, was my honest reaction.

It was a spontaneous suggestion on my half, but I’m glad I had such a good idea. I was somehow entranced as I listened to her.

“...And then, that...teacher did that...and then...um...”

“Azusa?”

I glanced toward Azusa to see her nodding off. Her body swayed with a fixed rhythm every time her head bobbed forward.

“...What to do with you?”

I could have carried her to her room, but she said she couldn’t sleep. It’d be a shame if I carried her there only for her to wake up and not be able to fall back to sleep. I snatched a fleece blanket from my bed and put it on her.

“Only this once. I mean it.”

I knew she wouldn’t answer me, but I had to say it.

“**KOUYA!** Forgive the intrusion! Azusa is missing! Do you know where she is?” Ichi bellowed, bursting into my room pale-faced first thing in the morning. I was already awake and changed, but Azusa was still sound asleep on the couch.

Ah, crap, I instantly thought—and with good reason.

“K-K-Ko-Kouya! What did you do to Azusa?! Why is Azusa here? Don’t you dare tell me you did something to her?!”

“...I haven’t done anything.”

I can’t claim I haven’t done anything at all, but I haven’t done anything worthy of concern.

“Please answer me this instant! Why did you let her sleep here? I was even starting to have a little faith in you! This is why men are! This is why men are just so!”

Apparently, I brought out Ichi’s misandry. Ichi woke up Azusa in a flurry and scuffled out of the room with her as if it were on fire. Upon seeing the wall shake with how hard she slammed my door behind her, I dismally decided to eat breakfast alone.

As expected, the details of the night were transmitted from Azusa to Ichi and Ichi to Subaru, who intruded on my one-man breakfast to tease me like the buzzing menace he is. I should have hit him harder.

Chapter 43: A New Every day

“A. ZU. SA! I forgot my textbook for the next class. Won’t you show me yours?”

“Hiragi, why is it you seem to forget your textbooks each and every day, hm?”

“I won’t answer unless you call me Tsukiharu.”

“...Tsukiharu, why do you forget your textbook every single day?”

“Hm, because it’s a necessity?”

“You’re doing it on purpose. I know.”

A week had passed since Azusa started attending school and she was already stumped over how to handle Tsukiharu. Every day he forgot a textbook and took advantage of their seats being next to each other to push their desks together. He talked to her whether she liked it or not for more than half of their break time, and continually invited her to lunch with him no matter how many times she turned him down. At any rate, they were together ALL THE TIME. Azusa was starting to feel like her fear of Tsukiharu was losing out to her annoyance.

“What do you plan on doing for lunch, Azusa?” Tsukiharu asked his standard question before lunch break.

“I will be dining somewhere you won’t be,” Azusa retorted with her usual line.

“I guess I’ll just follow you everywhere you go then. Neither of us will get lunch that way, huh?”

“...You’re a real pest, you know?” she couldn’t help complaining under her breath. She frantically looked up thinking he heard her, but Tsukiharu stood there smiling like nothing happened, giving her temporary relief. She didn’t want to anger him.

Tsukiharu genuinely kept the promise he made her on the first day. He didn’t hurt or kill anyone. He got along great with their classmates, and the way he smiled happily in class made him seem like a completely different person from the boy who abducted her. As long as he was at school, he was in the perfect mood and always smiling.

“You shouldn’t do that, Tsukiharu. You’re putting Azusa on the spot, so why don’t you eat with me instead?”

“I’m getting sick of eating with just you every day, Youta.”

“C’mon, let’s go, Tsukiharu. Lunch break is going to end soon! See you later, Azusa!”

“I’ll be seeing you later then, Azusa.”

This was the usual conversation following her rejection of

Tsukiharu's lunch invitation. Youta and Tsukiharu—it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say they appeared like best friends to anyone who saw them. Tsukiharu likely had ulterior motives since he knew Youta was Kouya's younger brother, but Azusa couldn't find a good reason to disrupt their fun, so she simply kept an eye on them for the time being.

UNSURPRISINGLY, Youta Kisaragi was popular.

Youta's tawny hair took on a faint amber color in the sunlight. His large, round eyes brought out his youthfulness and were set against refined facial features. His voice was a little deep compared to how his delicate looks got him mistaken for a woman. It goes without saying his kind personality went over well with his classmates; not to mention the way he looked angelic every time he smiled.

Furthermore, his mother's side of the family, the Kisaragis, were a pureblood noble vampire line with a history of birthing extraordinarily powerful vampire children. And his father was the current Red Coven's Patriarch—although only a select number of people were privy to that information.

With his physical prowess guaranteed by his lineage to be multiples higher than the average vampire, and his intelligence not far behind it, it was only natural for him to be popular. Hopelessly popular whether he liked it or not. Popular to the point a large fan group had formed at school.

What it all came down to was that the hopelessly popular Youta Kisaragi suddenly got real friendly with an average human who came from nowhere interesting, leading to mayhem among his fangirls.

"Your name is Azusa Saito, right? We have some things to say to you!"

"Don't you think you're flirting a little too much with our Youta?"

"Whoa, talk about clichéd," were the first words out of Azusa's mouth. A group of four girls had called her to the back of the school building, out of sight. All four girls glared at Azusa with deep wrinkles in their foreheads.

"You must be on your high horse all because you have a contract partner!"

"I am not."

What does it mean to have a contract partner? Is it like some kind of status to them?

"What's your relationship with Youta?! Answer me!"

"I know his older brother is all."

"I've never heard anything about Youta having an older brother! Quit spouting BS!"

"....."

I'm not lying though. You guys simply don't know, which doesn't make it a lie.

Azusa sighed loudly. She wanted to cry over how her sole oasis at school, lunch break, was being wasted. The four girls surrounding Azusa were spurred by her attitude into talking even more rabidly.

"Wow, what a poser! You make me sick!"

"He's not spending time with the likes of someone gross like you by choice! Get that through your ugly little head!"

"Slutty bitch!"

"This is what someone like you deserves!" The last girl shouted, drawing a knife from her pocket.

Even Azusa flinched and took a step back from the glinting knife, but careful assessment of the situation gave her the impression the girl just brought it out as a threat. The girl held it limply in her hand. She didn't hold it in a way used to cut someone, nor did she point the tip at Azusa—she only used the glimmer of the blade as an empty threat. Apparently, these girls thought they would win if they threatened the poor little human girl with a knife.

Azusa carefully looked around her. She grabbed a mop leaning against a nearby wall and spun it around in her hand.

"Nice," Azusa said to herself.

"What's so nice, huh?!"

"I was simply testing its weight."

"I have no idea what you are going to try with that thing, but—"

It felt like a gust of wind hit them.

"Knives are dangerous, so why don't you put it away?" Azusa said just as she sent the knife flying. It clattered on the ground behind the girls.

"...! Why you little!" the girl bellowed.

"The reality is that the majority of vampires don't have much difference in physical ability from humans before they awaken, right? I heard that from a friend," Azusa said. Of course, the friend she heard it from was Ichi. Azusa recalled the words Ichi told her in passing when she decided to attend school.

"You do not have to be pointlessly afraid at school just because you are surrounded by future vampires. Of course, there are exceptions like the scum known as Kouya and Tsukiharuru, but the students at your school are at a level before their awakening that puts them on par with humans in physical ability. In all actuality, you might be stronger than them because your physical abilities are superior to most humans."

"I'm a high-ranked kendo martial artist, so I'll go easy on you!"

Whoever wants to come at me is welcome to try!” Azusa said with manly gusto, holding the mop in front of her in her signature kendo pose.



Chapter 44: The First Promise

“AZUSA Saito! You’re ready to take us on this time, no?”

“You girls never get sick of this, do you? School’s out already! Let me go home!”

“You hurt our pride! Make up for it with your death!”

“Have you ever considered how I feel about having to bring a bamboo sword with me to school every single day even though I’m not even affiliated with the school club? It’s tiresome, bulky, and sucks! I’m the one who wants someone to make this up to me!”

Three days passed after the first time Azusa took out Youta’s fan group, and they still hadn’t given up. Every day since, they called her out during lunch and after school to one-sidedly try to lynch her.

However, she wasn’t the type to meekly let others attack her—she used her inherent reflexes and favorite bamboo sword to earn consecutive wins against them. But doing so was like adding oil to fire, the girls’ only got more into it.

Today they summoned her to the back of the gym—a complete cliché in Azusa’s books. *Can’t they come up with anything more original?*

“There are five of you today? Isn’t that a bit much? Now that it’s come down to facing five pre-vampires—”

“You’re finally ready to recoil in fear of us, aren’t you?! You’re in for it now!”

“I won’t be able to go easy on you anymore, so try your best not to get hurt, all right?” Azusa swung her bamboo sword down on the head of one of the girls before she finished speaking.

BANG! A dull thud reverberated from the girl’s skull as she sank to the ground. Azusa spun around and slammed the sword into another girl’s abdomen. The impact wasn’t enough to knock her out, so Azusa quickly followed it up with a punch to the chin. The force shook the girl’s head hard enough to drop her to ground. Three more to go.

“Savage! You are the worst ever!”

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who came at me in a group of five!”

“I was holding back a little because I heard you were a normal human! I won’t forgive you anymore!” shouted the girl who acted as the group’s leader.

The air around them instantly changed. The wind changed direction toward the leader, gathering around her. The leaves on the surrounding trees rustled, and the wind’s mounting strength broke the more delicate branches.

This seems bad. No need to guess this isn’t going to go well. This

inhuman aura and ability...could this girl be one of the—

“Exceptions?” Azusa said the last part of her thoughts aloud.

Clap. Clap. Clap.

A deliberate clapping echoed behind the gym just as Azusa’s face stiffened for whatever was about to hit her.

And then came a familiar voice as an unexpected person appeared from the gym wall, “All right, girls, let’s stop there. I just tattled on you, so the teachers should be coming soon. Plus, I don’t want to have to break my promise.”

“Tsukiharu?”

Tsukiharu pushed up his black hair and flashed a deliberate smile—his expression was an exact replica of the expression he had the day he abducted her. It was his characteristic smile that seemed to make a fool of you, all while luring you in with a false sense of friendliness. A smile touched his lips, but dark, simmering rage tinged his eyes.

Why is he here? Azusa thought as goose bumps popped up across her body.

“To be perfectly honest, fights between girls is unsightly and I don’t want to see such a farce, but Azusa was totally wiping the floor with you girls, so I was more than happy to quietly watch from the sidelines. But you had to go and ruin that, didn’t you? You lose by default for breaking the rules. I’ll be the one to play with you if you take it any further. What do you want to do?”

Azusa immediately put herself between Tsukiharu and the girls who were just trying to attack her. Cold sweat trickled down her back.

Amused by Azusa’s actions, a deep chuckle came from Tsukiharu as he summoned blue flames to his right hand. The girls muffled their shrieks behind Azusa.

“You promised me, didn’t you? Keep your word!” Azusa shouted on the spur of the moment. But his creepy smile didn’t falter.

“You’re kind, Azusa,” he crooned.

“Tsukiharu!”

“...I know. I’m just kidding, Azusa. I would never break my promise with you. Relax.” Tsukiharu closed his hand into a fist; the flames pulled back inside his palm and vanished with a puff. Azusa could hear teeth chattering behind her. The color drained from their faces the instant they realized the difference in strength and instinctually sensed death.

“You...” the leader tried to say something, but Tsukiharu interrupted her.

“Why don’t we forget what just happened? The teachers will be coming any moment now, so get your friends and run away. Won’t it be bad for some of you if your families caught word of what you are doing? It would be a big help if you could make it known not to mess

with Azusa ever again,” Tsukiharuru said returning to his usual grin and friendly demeanor—he was practically another person.

“Oh yeah, you girls probably don’t know this, so I’ll do you a favor and let you in on it—the vampire Azusa contracted with is *the* Akaoni. I bet he’s using his familiars to keep an eye on her and witnessed everything that’s been happening. You tried to hurt his precious contractor—I wonder if you will live to see morning? Won’t it be fun to see who he’ll off first?”

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

Their screams echoed across campus.

“**TSUKIHARU**, I had the wrong idea about you all this time. Thank you. I’ll listen to anything you say as thanks. To start with, won’t you do me the honor of drinking my blood?’ How does that sound for a thank you?”

“.....” Azusa gave Tsukiharuru the evil eye for his mimicry of her as they headed to the school gate together. Or rather, Azusa was heading to the school gate and Tsukiharuru was following her.

“Hey, Azusa? Are you listening to me? I, at least, thought I was protecting you from the trio of weasels trying to cut you up.”

“Trio of weasels?”

Is he talking about the Japanese folklore monster thought to be a trio of weasels who appear in a whirlwind to cut their enemies to pieces? Azusa shivered, finally realizing the danger she had been in. *Would that attack have been capable of cutting off my head in one blow? Would it have left wounds I could never recover from?*

“Well, I’m pretty sure it was an attack of measly strength that would have only cut your cheek, but still...” Tsukiharuru muttered quietly to himself. Azusa didn’t hear him. From what she knew of him, he was probably saying something bad, but she felt she should at least be polite, and turned to face him.

“I’ll say my thanks at least. Thank you, Tsukiharuru. You saved me.”

“You’re welcome. So? What are you going to do to pay me back?”

“Excuse me?”

“I saved you because I wanted to be compensated for it.”

“You’re sick!” Azusa shouted.

“First, I would be overjoyed if you would let me drink your blood. Regularly.”

“I won’t!”

“Okay. I want to get to know you better, so let’s go on a date!

Just the two of us! Without the Akaoni's watchful eye!"

"That sounds like a flag for getting myself abducted and caged!"

"Don't you want to test how far you have to be taken away for him to no longer be able to locate you?"

"I do not want to test that!"

"What will you agree to then?"

"I won't do anything for you. I thanked you!"

"A simple thanks isn't enough payment for saving your life."

"....."

"...All right, let's eat together then. Let's have lunch alone together tomorrow!"

"Seriously?" Azusa's determination wavered with him lowering the bar for what he wanted and how that measured up to him saving her life. Then he gave the final push needed.

"Then let's do lunch with you, me, and Youta! I can't do anything to you with Youta there, right? How about it?"

"Yeah. Well, if that's all you want..." Azusa reluctantly nodded.

"Woohoo! It's a promise!" Tsukiharu exclaimed with a twinkle in his eyes.

He really does seem like a normal boy when he acts like this. Azusa thought. As she watched him walk a little ahead of her with a hop in his step, she found herself unable to resent him as much as she had before.

"Hey, Tsukiharu? I was just thinking, earlier you mentioned Kouya is using his familiars to watch us. Is that true? Or were you bluffing?" Azusa asked once Tsukiharu mellowed.

"Hm? It's true. See that cat?"

Azusa looked in the direction he pointed. A single black cat sat on a branch of a tree at the side of the campus. The cat closely watched them without moving.

Is that the same cat Kouya handed me the time I went into town?

"It's been there since the day I brought up the deal with you, meaning it's been around for a while now. You haven't noticed?"

"No, not at all."

"I believe he can see and hear everything the cat sees and hears. I'm pretty sure he would have come out to save you if I hadn't. Well, pandemonium would have broken out if the Akaoni showed up."

"You brought about your own form of pandemonium."

"You think so?"

"I do."

Crud, I've got a bad feeling about this, Azusa thought, a frightening realization dawning on her.

"Does that mean he overheard the promise...I just made with you?"

“Promise? You mean to have lunch together? Yup. In all likelihood, he heard.”

The blood drained from her face. Lately, Kouya spent every day drilling things into her like, “Don’t get involved with Tsukiharu. Don’t talk to him. Don’t touch him.” He more than once went into full-lecture mode whenever she greeted Tsukiharu, saying things like, “You lack caution!”

Every time she wondered how he knew about her interactions with Tsukiharu, but now she learned it was the cat. Convinced the cat ousted her, she shook her head.

That’s not the problem here! There’s a more important issue at hand! The critical thing is that I’ll have a full-course lecture waiting for me at home today! And I have a hunch today’s fit of anger is going to be leaps and bounds beyond what I’ve faced until now!

Azusa’s eyes spun and sweat formed on her hands and feet. Meanwhile, her legs gradually brought her closer to the school gate.

“You guys look awfully friendly.”

Azusa saw a monster at her destination.

Chapter 45: Thirst

SEVERAL hours earlier.

Kouya escorted Azusa to school as usual, sent his cat familiar out to keep an eye on her, and returned to his room at the mansion where, without taking off his contacts, he collapsed on the bed and exhaled painfully.

“...I’m thirsty,” he mumbled. He rolled onto his back and ran his hands through his hair, messing it up.

His body felt languid, his head heavy, and his limbs numb. The symptoms resembling anemia taking over his body shifted into the far worse symptoms connected to the impulse for blood. Kouya groaned.

I want blood...

The source of his need for blood stemmed from him overestimating his abilities. In the first place, he was called a vampire for a reason—drinking blood should be the norm—not needing to drink blood was the abnormality. Kouya’s first mistake was failing to recognize it. He thought he didn’t need to drink blood period. That he could make do without any.

The undeniable truth was that Kouya went years, decades even, without drinking a drop of blood. But he was only making do with the power he had—he couldn’t go on forever without blood. His second mistake was writing off the *thirst* he felt during his battle with the legion of beasts summoned by Shiro as simply a momentary lapse in his endurance.

Kouya Doumeki was undeniably powerful. His ability to naturally produce blood without taking in new blood got him through most things. However, that only applied to living a normal life and severing the heads of his former kin, now known as F ranks. The quality of a vampire’s blood was the quality of their essence. The amount of their blood was the amount of their essence. No matter how great the quality or how large the quantity, any resource will eventually be depleted if it’s used too much without being replenished.

That was Kouya’s current predicament. To put it simply: he had used too much power.

His supplies weren’t large enough for his needs. Despite receiving blood from Azusa a month ago, he needed more. A sign of how much he had been pushing his body beyond its limits. Another way to look at it was like a debt. The debt gradually built up every day, month, and year as he withdrew more. Now the loan sharks were banging at the proverbial door for him to cough up all he had borrowed at once.

Kouya rolled over in bed wondering how much his ‘blood interest’ had accumulated. The hammering pain of his headache and

the bile building up in his throat kept him from thinking much. He was ashamed of his body for not working the way he wanted it to.

To take his mind off his sickness, he aligned his consciousness with the cat familiar he released to keep tabs on Azusa. There was a small click in his ears before the image behind his closed eyes changed from darkness to scenery. He switched only his right eye and ear over to pick up the same vision and hearing as the cat. The tumultuous noise unique to school came blaring into his head—he quickly cut the connection to his ear.

This is tiresome with a pounding headache.

His right eye caught sight of Azusa attending class normally.

I doubt anything will happen during class, so I'm sure she's fine on her own for now.

“Tch!” Kouya clicked his tongue the moment his assumption was proven wrong by the person who entered his line of vision.

Tsukiharu. Kouya had cut his connection to the cat's ears, keeping him in the dark about what he was saying, but he could easily guess it was the usual, “I forgot my textbook for the next class. Won't you show me yours?”

Azusa flashed her usual disgusted look as she pushed her desk next to his and opened the textbook between them.

She's doing it...again. Rage simmered inside Kouya. Tsukiharu was responsible for a part of it, but the brunt of his anger was directed toward Azusa. *How many times must I warn her before she stops?! I told her to be careful around him. She should just leave him be...*

Tsukiharu made eye contact with the cat. His lips curled up in a triumphant smirk, clearly directed at Kouya.

I want to beat him to a pulp!

FLASH-FORWARD to the current time.

“Is there anything else you have to say for yourself?”

“Nope. None.”

“You understand what I'm trying to say, don't you?”

“I do. I'm sorry.”

Azusa sat upright on her knees in her room. Kouya stood hovering over her in a daunting pose, with a chilling expression capable of freezing anyone on the spot. For a little over an hour, she was stuck kneeling while getting an earful of his lecture. The lecture was on the same thing as always, but his anger-levels were ineluctably off the scale this time.

“So? What are you going to do tomorrow now that you've committed yourself?”

Tomorrow being the day Azusa promised to have lunch with Tsukiharu. Azusa thoughtfully considered it.

"I will cautiously eat my lunch!"

"TCH!" Kouya clicked his tongue.

Apparently, she answered wrong.

Further frustrated by her disagreeable answer, Kouya's voice dropped several tones into more of a growl than a voice, "You're going to eat lunch with him then?"

"A promise is a promise after all..."

"Is it now?" He wasn't asking a question but bluntly threatening her. She could hear the unsaid follow up line of, "You plan on angering me even more?"

Scary! I'll say it just this once—he's scarier than Tsukiharu! Has Kouya always been like this? Azusa thought as her face contorted with the desire to cry.

Her first impression of Kouya was a calm, cool, and collected young man. He didn't talk much and it was hard to tell what he was thinking or feeling. But she was getting a different impression from him lately. He talked more often and his thoughts and feelings were clearly getting easier to pick up on. Subaru, who had known Kouya for a long time, didn't have any reason to think he was acting differently, so it wasn't Kouya's personality that changed as much as his relationship with Azusa.

Put simply, their relationship was at a point where the walls had gone down a little. Azusa was incredibly happy and, in this moment, regretting the fact they had grown closer.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Ah, yes, I am."

"You've got guts to space out on me."

"Kouya, I am not the enemy here! Don't glare at me like I'm your bitter rival! You are scaring me!"

"To think you still have enough mental composure to talk back to me. Looks like you require additional chastisement."

"Scary! You're scary! Scary, scary, scary! I don't want any more of this! Let's take a deep breath and calm down first, okay?!"

"In the first place, you lack caution..."

The lecture went on for another hour.

"Don't let down your guard tomorrow just because I'm watching and Youta is there. All right?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am only agreeing this time because there's no guarantee he won't use your committing to have lunch together as a shield to further threaten you. I won't allow a second time."

"Yes, sir."

“We’re good as long as you understand. Be on guard for things like that from now on.”

“Yes, sir.”

Lecture time came to an end with Azusa literally on the verge of tears. She felt like she had faced terrible experiences ever since she started attending school. Where did all her enthusiasm and excitement on the day she decided to attend go? Being bored to death was unbearable, but being scared to death was even more so. Both were relatively close to a living hell for her.

Azusa could barely feel her legs anymore after kneeling for hours. Kouya forcefully pulled her to her numb feet and tried to get her out the door.

“Please keep an eye out for me tomorrow,” Azusa tried to say just as her legs gave out.

“...!”

Kouya supported her before she fell.

“I’m sorry, Kouya! Eh? Whoa!”

“...!”

Unable to hold her up, he collapsed with her. Her first thought after finding herself on top of Kouya was, *Oh no, did I gain weight?*

Chapter 46: The Source of His Poor Health

“...AND so it seems like Kouya isn’t feeling well. Do you have any idea why, Youta? I tried asking him, only for him to reply with, ‘It’s not your problem’ and ‘don’t worry about it.’”

“Hmm, I wonder what it could be. I only really got to know Kouya a little over a year ago, so I still don’t know him too well. I doubt he’s got a serious illness or anything. Maybe he’s just not getting enough sleep?”

“Azusa.”

“A lack of sleep, huh? Now that you mention it, he did say he goes to bed at 3 a.m. every night and he woke up earlier than me the other day. At like 6 a.m.? Which means he’s been getting less than three hours of sleep a day?! That would definitely lead to a lack of sleep.”

“Hold on a minute, did I just hear you say he woke up earlier than you? What’s this? Have you guys already crossed that line—”

“Hey, Azusa?”

“WHAT?! No! No way! You got the wrong idea! I made the mistake of falling asleep in his room and he just let me stay asleep until morning!”

“Oh, that’s all? But it sounds like it’s true you and my brother get along great. Maybe he really is just lacking sleep then?”

“Hey, I’m talking to you here!”

“Geez! What is it, Tsukiharu?!”

“Is that really something you should be talking about with me present?”

“Why not?”

“You’re talking about Youta’s older brother being in a weakened state right now, right? Should you talk about that with me around?”

“Uh-oh.”

“He is going to get seriously angry at you for not being more careful. Well, I’m a nice guy, so I won’t take advantage of the situation, but still.”

“OH MY GOSH! Forget everything! Seriously, just forget everything you heard! Please forget it!”

Azusa, Youta, and Tsukiharu were having lunch together on the rooftop as Azusa promised. The normally locked rooftop was Youta and Tsukiharu’s usual lunch spot. Naturally, Tsukiharu destroyed the lock and put on a new one, so only they could access the area. The teachers never went up there, leaving the change undiscovered.

Not even Kouya’s cat familiar could access the rooftop, leaving it to carefully observe them from the top of a nearby tree. The distance

kept him from overhearing their conversation, but the tree was tall enough the third-story rooftop would be fully visible to him.

Azusa had been consulting Youta about Kouya's condition the previous night—thoroughly forgetting Tsukiharu was there too...

"Please, please, please forget it! I was lectured for two hours straight yesterday. I won't survive another day of Kouya in lecture-mode!"

"Which is why I was trying to warn you not to expose such information to me?"

"I know! I won't say anymore! So please do me this favor and let it go this once!"

"All right, all right. I got it. I won't," Tsukiharu answered her with a forced smile.

Azusa's wariness of Tsukiharu weakened whenever she saw him acting like a normal high school boy. She sighed at her own stupidity and strongly resolved she needed to fix that part of her personality.

She was genuinely trying her best not to speak to Tsukiharu. She ignored him, acted curtly, and treated him like he didn't exist. As a result, she completely forgot he was there and accidentally exposed Kouya's weakness in front of him.

Anyway, it's too much to ask me to ignore someone... Even when he abducted me and locked me up, I started cooking for him by the third day. Azusa found her lack of caution and ability to adapt to any circumstance frightening.

"Hey, Azusa?"

"Hm? What's up?" Azusa was ashamed of herself for responding to him normally when he spoke to her out of the blue; she always forgot to ignore him.

"From what I heard of your conversation, I think Akaon—Youta's older brother is simply in need of blood. Are you making sure to feed him your blood?"

"What?"

"I'm pretty sure prolonged tuning of his senses to his familiar has got to be a serious drain on his energy and blood levels. I bet he's staying connected to that cat as long as you're at school," Tsukiharu said, pointing to the black cat sitting intently on the tree branch. Was it just Azusa's imagination the black cat was glowering at Tsukiharu?

"Tuning your senses to your familiar doesn't burn too much energy in and of itself, but the sheer length of time is going to take its toll. He has to stay connected from 8 a.m. to about 6 p.m. on days you stay late, right? Totaling ten hours, without severing his connection at all. Keeping that up every single day has to be pretty excruciating and draining..."

"It is? ...By the way, I'm just curious, but what will happen if he

continues on without taking in more blood?"

"You would normally die, no? The blood sucking part of bloodsucking vampires isn't just there to sound cool, you know?" Youta answered her.

Azusa gasped.

Kouya might die at this rate and it would be my fault too! He prepared the cat to look after my safety. And that's taking a toll on him. Azusa couldn't sit still once she arrived at that conclusion. She put away her half-eaten lunch and abruptly jumped to her feet.

"Youta, can you tell the teachers I left early today because I didn't feel good?"

"Sure. I'll let them know, 'Azusa went home because of sudden excruciating stomach pain.'"

"Thank you! As for you, Tsukiharu!"

"What is it, Azusa? Are you going to thank me too?" Tsukiharu jested.

"Yes, I am. You helped me big time here. Thanks so much!"

"Huh?"

Azusa dashed from the rooftop, leaving a befuddled Tsukiharu and Youta behind.

"Good for you, Tsukiharu."

"Nah, well, yeah."

Youta carefully assessed Tsukiharu as he fidgeted bashfully. Noticing his gaze, Tsukiharu glared at Youta with pursed lips.

"What?"

"I was just thinking you genuinely want to be just friends with Azusa. At first, I thought it was because you have romantic feelings for her, but it doesn't seem that way. But you were really happy when she thanked you."

"Well, that's true, but..."

"Hey, can I ask what Azusa is to you?"

"...What she is to me?" Tsukiharu repeated with a troubled expression that turned dark when he locked his eyes on Youta. "What have you heard about me from your brother?"

"Let's see, 'he's dangerous, so don't get close to him,' is all he said."

"Then why are you spending time with me right now?"

"I don't need my older brother's permission for who I choose to be friends with, do I? I wanted to be friends with you. It's as simple as that."

"....."

Tsukiharu froze, his eyes wide as saucers. Youta watched him as his expression grew darker and more apologetic.

"Tsukiharu?"

“The reason I spend time with you is because—”

“I know why. You wanted to gather information on Kouya, right?”

“Huh?”

“I’m not an idiot. I could grasp that much from the first time I saw you two interact.”

“Then why stick around me?”

“Because I thought you looked lonely. Oh, it’s not out of pity! At first, I simply couldn’t leave you alone...”

“.....”

“I did it on a whim. But that only applies to the beginning. I hang out with you now because I have a lot of fun being with you. Okay? You can keep it limited to what you can tell me, so please talk to me. I know there is a secret between you, Azusa, and the others. I realize there are things you can’t say. So it’s fine if you limit it to what you can say. I don’t even mind if it’s a lie. Tell me more about yourself. And if there’s anything we can worry about together, let’s tackle it together. I might not be able to do much for you, but I can listen and give you a push in the right direction.”

“Didn’t you ever hear curiosity killed the cat?” Tsukiharu pouted and turned his face away, red tingeing his ears.

Youta smiled broadly at his reaction, “There you go! I wanted to see you get back that sharp tongue of yours.”

“Shaddup!” Tsukiharu grumbled out, happiness hidden in his expression.

Chapter 47: Reason for Her Tears

AZUSA ran down the hallway after leaving Tsukiharu and Youta. She hectically entered the classroom to snatch her bag and left just as quickly. Classmates tried talking to her, but Azusa didn't have it in her to deal with them.

Kouya is going to die!

Her heart thumped loudly against her chest. Of course, Kouya's death was only a possibility stemming from the worst-case scenario. She didn't believe he was at the precipice of the worst-case scenario yet, but she hated the idea there was even a possibility of him dying. She thoroughly comprehended the situation, but still couldn't stop the panic forcing her to race ahead.

She ran full-speed through the school gate. Someone yanked on the back of her shirt. Her shirt collar pulled up to her throat, choking her.

"Where are you going? Don't you have afternoon classes?"

"K-Kouya?" Azusa looked over her shoulder to find Kouya standing there with his hand on her shirt, his usual exasperated expression plastered on his face. But the instant he registered the look on her face, his face rapidly stiffened until all expression was removed from it.

"Kouya?"

"Was it Tsukiharu?" he growled.

"Pardon?"

"Who did this to you?" Kouya gently ran his thumb under Azusa's eye. She didn't realize she had been crying until she saw the water droplets on his hand when he pulled it away. She rubbed at her eyes with the corner of her shirt and tried smiling at him, but Kouya's low growl of a voice dropped several more tones. "What did he do to you?"

"What?"

"He did something to you, didn't he?"

"No, I'm okay! It's okay, Kouya!"

"He said something to you on the rooftop, didn't he? Is that the cause of your tears?"

"I can't deny he is partly at fault when you put it that way, but this has nothing to do with Tsukiharu—"

"Are you protecting him?"

"No! I am not! Kouya, your face is scaring me! If I had to say the reason, it's you, Kouya, so we're good! Nothing has been done to me nor did I do anything!"

"....I'm the cause? Did I do something to you?" Relieved, Kouya's

expression softened a little. His eyebrows still knitted into a confused scowl, but at the very least his expression of, "I'm going to kill you-know-who the moment you give the word," had disappeared. Azusa could breathe freely knowing he wasn't going to go on a rampage now.

"Let's go home first," she suggested.

"What about your afternoon classes?"

"I decided to ditch them today! And use the time to chat with you instead!"

"...Is that so?" Kouya nodded, not quite catching onto what was going on.

Azusa grabbed his arm and pulled him home with her.

HOW did this happen? Kouya couldn't help the deluge of thoughts accosting him. He sighed as he looked at the girl straddling his stomach. She ran a box cutter along her wrist.

"Please decide whether you prefer me to force my blood on you or if you are going to take a drink for yourself."

"....."

They were in Kouya's room, on the floor; it happened as soon as they walked through the door.

"I apologize for pushing you on the ground. But you would normally never fall over if I tackled you, right? Doesn't the fact you fell over prove your need of blood?"

"...It's none of your concern."

"In other words, you need more blood?"

"I'm fine."

Kouya's response was clear affirmation he needed more blood. But his attitude screamed he didn't want her help, which enraged Azusa.

"What part of you is fine, hm? I heard all about how you will die if you go on without enough blood! So basically, you're headed toward an early grave at this rate!" she shouted.

"I'm still fine. I'll think more about what to do if it gets worse than this. For now, get off me."

"Still? What do you mean STILL?! In other words, you are admitting you might possibly die in the future! I will not move! Not until you promise to drink my blood! Now, please make your decision! Shall I slice my wrist open and force my blood down your throat or will you man up and drink from me on your own? If your body is still refusing to drink blood, I will force it down until you can't throw it up. Please let me know if you need that kind of assistance!"

Kouya sighed loud enough for Azusa to hear. His red eyes seemed to waver as he looked up at her.

"I don't understand your desperation."

"I don't want you to die, obviously!"

"...I was able to make do until now. It should take care of itself eventually."

"There is a chance you won't push through it this time!"

"Even if that were to happen, it has nothing to do with you. You can just switch over to Ichi as your contractor."

"It does have something to do with me! I will be sad if you die, Kouya! I will cry! My eyes will turn bright-red with all the tears! Did you know rabbit eyes are red because they cried a lot from being lonely?"

"....." Kouya stared at Azusa in wide-eyed surprise. He chuckled wryly and muttered, "You never change," under his breath.

"Will you be lonely if I die?" he asked loud enough for her to hear.

"Of course I will be lonely and sad if the person I love dies! Ah, um, by love I mean I love you as a person I know!" Azusa suddenly turned bright-red and tried denying her own statement.

Kouya started chuckling. He hid his mouth with his hand, but he couldn't hide his dimples and the mirth in his eyes. Azusa angrily pounded on his chest.

"Kouya!"

"Sorry, sorry. Is that why you were crying?" Kouya apologized like he didn't really mean it, and asked her with a much gentler tone than before.

"That is definitely one of the reasons, but I'm mortified you won't rely on me when you are in such a bad state... You are always saving me, but I haven't been able to return the favor even once yet. Moreover, I am the reason you are this desperately in need of blood, right? You may have just contracted with me to keep tabs on me, but we did contract, and yet you won't rely on me when things are critical. I started thinking I really am useless..."

"You were thinking all that?" he asked in surprise. She nodded slowly. Kouya gently stroked her cheek to pacify her pouting. Tears welled up in her eyes. She rubbed at the large teardrops with her sleeve.

"Your eyes will swell if you rub them too much," Kouya advised, grabbing her arm. His eyes met her offended glare, drawing a half-smile out of him.

"Sorry."

"You should be!"

"I really am sorry."

"We wouldn't need the police if apologies solved all problems!"

"Forgive me."

"I will not!"

"What must I do for you to forgive me?" Kouya asked.

Azusa pursed her lips further, as if to say, "You still don't get it?" There was nothing scary about being glared at with puffy eyes, but Kouya bit his tongue to keep from saying what would likely further incite her wrath and waited for her to speak instead.

"...I want you to rely on me more," her voice dropped to a carrying whisper as she turned her face away from him. He put both his hands on her face and turned it back toward him.

"Will you let me have your blood?"

"Wrong."

"...Please let me have a drink?"

"What am I—some bartender you don't know?"

"Let me drink your blood."

"...Okay, go ahead," Azusa said with a happy smile. Her infectious smile got a smile out of Kouya too.

"Put the box cutter away. I'll drink it my way."

"You can drink on your own?" Azusa asked with concern. The fact his past trauma kept him from drinking blood most of his life concerned her. Contrary to her worry, he roughly ruffled the hair on her head with a content smile.

"Curiously enough, I think I'm okay when it comes to you. Well, I'll figure out what to do if it turns out not to work."

"Is it okay to approach such a vital task so carelessly?"

"I'll make do. Come here." Kouya reached both hands out to Azusa and gestured like he was waiting for her to come into his arms.

In other words, he's inviting me into his embrace? For me to come to him? Azusa turned tomato-red at the thought of entering into the embrace of a vampire.

"I believe doing that will end with us in an awkward embrace! I'm heavy! I gained weight recently!"

"No worries. Your weight is nothing to me. Aren't you coming?"

"Aren't you acting kind of strange, Kouya? Were you the type to say stuff like that?"

"Good question. I'm quite surprised myself.... You won't come to me then?"

"You said it again! Impossible! Not happening! I will die from embarrassment!"

"Shall we do it in reverse then?"

The room flipped over. By the time she realized it, Azusa was looking up at the ceiling. A pair of ruby-red eyes were right in front of her face. It was too late by the time she comprehended the position

she was in—his lips were already on her neck. She grabbed a handful of his shirt and squeezed her eyes shut in anticipation of the impact. Sensing her fear, he whispered sweetly in her ear.

“Want to stop? You’re scared, aren’t you?”

She slowly opened her eyes to be met with his glowing eyes and half-smile. He gently stroked her head with his right hand as he caressed her back with his left.

“You were scared the last time too. Want to save it for another time? Nothing bad will happen to me anytime soon.”

He was referring to when Azusa accidentally fell asleep in his room. He had pushed her down on the couch like this then too. Only now remembering, her already deeply flushed cheeks grew even hotter. She vigorously shook her head.

“I’m not scared! I’m embarrassed is all! Also, I just hate the pain... I will be fine, so please continue!”

“Want to bite down on me then? I can’t do anything for your embarrassment, but won’t this help alleviate the pain a little?” Kouya suggested, pointing to his neck. And then he buried his face in her neck.

“Bite me if it hurts, okay?” he whispered next to her ear. His voice was followed by the sound of flesh being pierced.



Chapter 48: Realization

Kouya's POV

AZUSA was straddling my stomach as she ran a box cutter along her wrist and glared down at me. Her usual innocence took a backseat to a serious, challenging voice.

Azusa made this aggressive move the moment we got back to the mansion. Once I dropped her off at her room, I returned to my room to change as I usually do. I removed the dreadful contact lenses and pulled off my coat, when a reserved knock came from the door. I concentrated my awareness to sense she was in front of my room and found myself tackled the moment I opened the door to see what was up. She pushed me against the ground and straddled my stomach to keep me from getting back up.

Then she pulled out a box cutter and presented me with this ultimatum, "Please decide whether you prefer me to force my blood on you or if you are going to take a drink for yourself."

At the time, I didn't even try to comprehend what she was saying as her erratic, impulsive actions took me by complete surprise. My brain gradually shifted from her presence on top of me to decoding what she said. Put simply, she found out. Either Tsukiharu or Youta pointed out my need for blood, resulting in her apprehension I might die.

If I put my real thoughts into words, it would have been, "You should just leave me be."

Instead, I said, "I don't understand your desperation."

"I don't want you to die, obviously!"

I didn't know how to react to her instant reply.

I'm on the side that abducted her and locked her in this town. While she may have come to trust me somewhat for her survival, I can only see everything going in a positive direction for her if I die. With me gone, the extent I observe and report back on her will disappear with me, and she'll be free of my nagging. Most of all, I'm sure she would enjoy her life more if the person she was stuck with all the time was better with words. I believe she has more perseverance than most people considering how she doesn't complain about having her actions limited or being watched 24/7 by a man who can't even crack a joke.

My heart ached at the thought. I couldn't breathe when I realized I just logically explained how she could never wish for me to stay

alive. Many people find my existence a nuisance. She is simply one of many. Even so, it deeply pains me. Despite her not fearing my eyes, despite her happily approaching me, I am just a nuisance to her in the end. I'm nothing more than a nuisance in her life. If that is the case, what reason could she have to not wish me dead?

I pondered what benefit my living could have for her. And then it instantly hit me. *Our contract. She gained a lot more freedom than before due to our contract. Maybe she thinks she would lose all her newfound freedom if I die.*

The thought darkens my mood, making my words come out deeper and sharper than usual, "Even if that were to happen, it has nothing to do with you. You can just switch over to Ichi as your contractor."

For some reason, I couldn't say, "Ichi or Subaru". Naturally, I have no intentions of dying any time soon, but I thought if anything were to happen to me, another woman would be best to take over the contract with Azusa. It's not something I brought up out of consideration of Azusa's feelings, but to satisfy my own ego.

My response must have rubbed Azusa the wrong way, because she snapped at me, a little red in the face.

"It does have something to do with me! I will be sad if you die, Kouya! I will cry! My eyes will turn bright-red with all the tears! Did you know rabbit eyes are red because they cried a lot from being lonely?"

"....."

"You never change," I said aloud what I meant as an internal thought. I heard those words once before. The memory of the days she has likely forgotten crossed my mind, slightly soothing my mood. I felt like her words finally reached me. She said she was sad. She said she would be sad and lonely if I die.

"Will you be lonely if I die?" I questioned to ascertain the truth.

She pursed her lips as if to prove how obvious it was with not just her words, but also her actions. "Of course I would be lonely and sad if the person I love dies! Ah, um, by love I mean I love you as a person I know!"

"The person I love."

I felt as if a rock had just fallen in my stomach.

So that's it. I love Azusa, I suddenly understood. Regardless of how desperately I rejected acknowledging her as a woman a short while ago, I was quickly convinced I loved her now. Thinking back, I had long since started viewing her as a woman, but I put a lid over those feelings. That lid just shattered.

Wanting to protect her and be with her wasn't because of my orders. I just wanted to protect and be with her. About eighty percent

of my wariness against Tsukiharu was out of jealousy. I just despised him for having her to himself for hours on end while she attended school. It's an undeniable fact I kept a wary eye on him as the dangerous entity who abducted Azusa and blew a gigantic hole in my gut, but I believe my jealousy ran rampant beyond that.

Coming to that understanding left me laughing. Just what had I been worrying for? What was I thinking? Azusa must have taken my laughter the wrong way, because she angrily pounded her fists against my chest.

"Kouya!"

"Sorry, sorry. Is that why you were crying?" I asked, partly to change the topic and partly in anticipation.

Her shoulders slumped and her face twisted with indescribable sadness.

"That is definitely one of the reasons, but I'm mortified you won't rely on me when you are in such a bad state... You are always saving me, but I haven't been able to return the favor even once yet. Moreover, I am the reason you are this desperately in need of blood, right? You may have just contracted with me to keep tabs on me, but we did contract, and yet you won't rely on me when things are critical. I started thinking I really am useless..."

By the time she finished talking, her voice dropped to a carrying whisper and she hung her head like the wind had been taken out of her wings. Despite that, her prior anger still lingered enough for her to turn away and only glare at me with her eyes.

"You were thinking all that?" I asked, surprised by her unexpected response. She slowly nodded. It made me happy. I thought I misheard her say the reason she cried was because she wanted me to rely on her more. I ran what she said through my head several times, leading to the same answer every time.

I'm way too happy about this.

Before I realized it, I extended my hand out to stroke her pouting cheek. Her eyes suddenly turned misty. She tried to hide her tears by rubbing at her eyes with her sleeves, so I came up with the random excuse it would make her eyes swell to move her hands out of the way. I wanted to see what she looked like when she cried. My eyes met with hers, which held a look of offense. My lips curled into a half-smile. She really is a girl of a hundred faces.

"Sorry."

"You should be!"

"I really am sorry."

"We wouldn't need the police if apologies solved all problems!"

"Forgive me."

"I will not!"

“What must I do for you to forgive me?” I asked.

I'll do anything for you.

I looked up to see she was still displeased. There was nothing scary about being glared at with puffy eyes, but I bit my tongue to keep from saying what would further incite her wrath and waited for her to speak instead.

“...I want you to rely on me more.”

After hearing her say that, I thought, *Aah, it's no use. I don't think I'll be able to let go of her after this.*

I always thought I would help her with all my strength should she someday want to leave this town. I would even go up against the Patriarch and bring her somewhere safe. But now that she had to go and say something like that, I wanted to keep her with me. Even though I could never bring her happiness.

Right now, even her averted gaze is dear to me. I put both my hands on her face and turned it toward me.

“Will you let me have your blood?”

“Wrong.”

“...Please let me have a drink?”

“What am I—some bartender you don't know?”

“Let me drink your blood.”

“...Okay, go ahead,” Azusa said with a brilliant smile. Her infectious smile got a smile out of me too, which seemed to only make her smile more.

I got her to put away the box cutter and held out my arms to invite her in, but she turned bright-red with embarrassment. I wanted to tell her to think about the position she was already sitting in, but decided not to. She was likely unaware of the fact she was currently straddling a man's stomach. It would be a waste if I pointed it out and she ran away. Somehow, thinking about stuff like this isn't like me.

Elated, I asked, “Aren't you coming?”

But she refused several times, saying how hard it would be for her to do, so I decided to be the one on top. I reversed our positions and placed her below me this time. I brought my face near her neck. Her scent numbed my rational thought. Perhaps it's because I was in such dire need of blood my heart thudded against my chest, and I started breathing heavily.

It was then I felt her hands trembling against where she grabbed a clump of my shirt. I slowly pulled back and examined her face. She pinched her lips in a straight line and turned her neck to the side to expose it to me. I frowned with a guilty conscience thinking I scared her again.

“Want to stop? You're scared, aren't you?” I asked. She looked at me in shock.

“You were scared the last time too. Want to save it for another time? Nothing bad will happen to me anytime soon.”

“I’m not scared! I’m embarrassed is all! Also, I just hate the pain... I will be fine, so please continue!”

She said it’s fine, right? Not my fault if she regrets this later.

“Want to bite down on me then? I can’t do anything for your embarrassment, but won’t this help alleviate the pain a little?” I suggested, undoing my shirt button and pointing to my neck. I leaned toward her, positioning my neck next to her mouth. As my fangs pierced her flesh, a sweet sting tickled my neck.

Chapter 49: Truce

ONE fine Sunday afternoon, Azusa and Kouya stood side by side in front of a colossal wrought-iron gate. Through the iron gate Azusa saw a stately manor twice the size of the mansion she was staying at. The mansion she stayed at wasn't small by any standards, but it looked like a cabin next to the manor looming past the gate.

Azusa clenched a cake box and the invitation to a tea party being held at the manor that she received the prior day. Youta Kisagari was the tea party's host. He took the time to write by hand that he would love for Kouya and Azusa to both come. Kouya agreed since it was an invitation from his little brother, despite not being fond of the idea. Meanwhile, Azusa was excited to receive her first invitation to someone's house since arriving at the Red Coven's town.

She stiffened in front of the overwhelming grandiose gate—Kouya, of course, had his trademark lack of reaction. She carefully pressed the intercom button.

"Yes? Who, may I ask, is at the gate?" a young woman formally responded.

"Hello. I'm Azusa Saito. Youta invited me to a tea party here today."

"We have been awaiting your arrival. I shall open the gate for you now. Please proceed straight from the gate until you come to a rose garden. Master Youta is awaiting your arrival there," the woman answered through the intercom.

A loud click and several beeps came from the gate as it automatically opened for them. They proceeded down the path as they were told, until they spotted a young man standing in front of an archway covered in roses.

"We were waiting for you, Kouya, Azusa. The others are already here and having a blast."

"The others?"

"You'll see when you get there," Youta said with his usual angelic smile. But a few minutes later Azusa learned her angel was actually a scheming little devil.

"Sorry for taking you out with a single blow before. I lost my cool when you took Azusa away from me."

"Don't think things will go your way this time! Ichi!"

"I have your back!"

"Okay, ok-ay! Enough. I forbid any fighting to take place here, so please be sure to stay cordial. Don't look so grim, Ichi. I love that face of yours too, but I love it most when you smile."

Azusa exited the rose covered archway to find Ichi, Subaru, and

Tsukiharu facing each other, ready to fight. She was rendered speechless as Youta mediated the chaotic situation. Kouya silently grabbed her arm and hid her behind his back.



“Come now, Kouya, Azusa, don’t just stand there. I have your seats all set for you. Take a seat. Here, Ichi, why don’t you sit too? You too, Tsukiharu! And since you’re here anyway, go ahead and sit too, Subaru,” Youta insisted, his attitude blatantly colder toward Subaru because of his feelings for Ichi.

The three of them grudgingly sat at the table. Azusa and Kouya followed suit. They sat around a gigantic, round mahogany table in the following order: Kouya, Azusa, Subaru, Ichi, Youta, and Tsukiharu. Tsukiharu was cushioned between Youta and Kouya, putting Azusa on the edge of her seat at the thought of a battle breaking out over the slightest thing. Azusa was the last one to sit down, so she tried to sit next to Tsukiharu instead, but was inevitably stopped by Kouya’s silent glare.

Azusa was the first person to break the suffocating, caustic silence, “What is going on here, Youta?”

“I secretly gathered you all here because I wanted to create an opportunity for you to get to know each other better. Of course, I got everyone together without telling Tsukiharu either, so this wasn’t his plan. Don’t get the wrong idea here. I tried asking Tsukiharu what happened between you guys many times, but he wouldn’t tell me much. I got the gist something happened between him and the rest of you though.

“Anyway, I thought something might change between you if you tried talking it over. Kouya, you told me countless times to be careful of Tsukiharu, but I just can’t see him as a bad guy. If you still can’t work things out after talking in this setting, I’m honestly okay with that. But I believe you are both in the wrong for fighting when you barely know anything about each other,” Youta explained, looking around the table with a smile that seemed to insinuate, “How about it?”

Youta confirmed no one had any objections before standing from his seat.

“You need to talk about things I can’t know about, right? I’ll keep an eye out for a suitable time to return, so please spend your time until then freely. You are welcome to do anything, aside from turning it into an all-out fight in my garden. And, Tsukiharu, don’t go saying things to egg them on, will you? I’ll cut all ties with you if you do.”

“...Whatever you say.”

Youta nodded with relief at Tsukiharu’s response and disappeared into the sprawling manor acting as the backdrop to their tea party.

With Youta gone, silence reigned over the round table.

After a good long pause, Subaru—having regained his cool—spoke up, “Well, since Youta created the opportunity for us, there are

definitely some things we want to ask you about. Will you answer our questions, little Tsukiharu?"

"Four against one is like some sort of cross-examination interrogation. I don't mind though. I'll answer you out of consideration for Youta this time. What do you want to know?" Tsukiharu asked, resting his chin on his hand with disinterest.

Subaru looked away for a moment, not sure where to start his questioning, until he finally faced Tsukiharu and leaned toward him on the table. "I'll get straight to the point then. What and who exactly are you? Is it true you possess the Ancient's body?"

"That would be the first question you ask, wouldn't it? I had a hunch it would be. That's what I heard, and I think you got your proof when you witnessed my ability to fight evenly with the Akaoni even though I haven't awakened yet."

"Who did you hear about it from?"

"From the researchers who created me. I was kept in the Blue Coven's underground laboratory until three and a half months ago. What I told you is all I ever heard since the day I was born, so I doubt it's a lie, but that's about all I know about myself. I couldn't provide you with more evidence even if I wanted to."

"Next question then. Why are you after Azusa? Also, why did you have someone else do the dirty work during your first attack? Had you come for Azusa yourself, our chances of getting her back would have been exceedingly slim."

"I think you have serious issues going out of your way to ask questions you already know the answers to."

"I want to hear it directly from your lips."

"Whatever then. As I said earlier, I possess the Ancient's body with human blood pumping through it. I'll surely fall to F rank if I awaken as a vampire with this body. Trying to prevent that future is one reason I went after her. Also, as I told Azusa before, I have nothing to do with the first kidnappers who went after her. I had only just broken out of the lab and was busy trying to keep myself alive—I didn't have the time to concern myself with other things yet. Besides, I only learned of her whereabouts because of what Shiro told me. I knew she existed before that, but I had no idea where she was."

"Ah!" Azusa shouted after Tsukiharu finished explaining.

Oh yeah, I never told them about that part! I completely forgot about it because of everything else that happened after he told me!

"Azusa?!"

"Azusa!"

"I-I'm sorry," she bowed her head to Ichi and Subaru. Kouya quietly glared at her from the seat beside her. She had nothing but regrets.

“...In other words, are you trying to say the Blues have nothing to do with the first kidnap attempt?”

“I don’t know about the Blues. I’m acting independently. My only ally is Shiro. You know, I thought I already told Azusa all of this... from the looks on your faces, I take it she never told you.”

“I! AM! SO! SORRY!” Azusa apologized, bowing her head with such vigor it slammed against the table. The daggers she could feel burrowing into her head kept her from looking up.

“Actually, can I talk to you guys about my thoughts on this? I think the Blue Coven probably had nothing to do with Azusa’s kidnapping. The Blue Coven still had no idea where she was while I was still at their laboratory. Or rather, it was more like they had given up on finding her. They seemed to think creating a new one would be easier than finding the old one.

“The researcher who ran away with the woman carrying Azusa apparently destroyed every piece of information relating to the experiment, causing failed attempt after failed attempt to reproduce the same result as Azusa. Despite all their failures, they still seemed to think they had a higher chance of success in creating a new version than finding Azusa, who the Red Coven couldn’t even find with the full use of all their assets and manpower. I think they had the same opinion before I was there too.”

“Doesn’t that only apply to the people in the laboratory though? The nobles in charge may have had a different opinion.”

“Hmm, I think the Red and Blue Covens would already be at each other’s throats if that were the case. The Blue Coven’s Patriarch came to the lab several times to check on my status, and I don’t think there’s anyone sterner and crueller than he is. He normally gave off the kind old man vibe, but I heard he killed every researcher who opposed him. He seemed like the type to do anything to achieve his goals. If he knew Azusa was here right now, I’m certain he would rage a full-out war with you. But things are relatively calm around her right now. It doesn’t seem like the two covens’ Patriarchs are in negotiations either.”

“I met the Blue Coven’s Patriarch before. He didn’t seem like that type. I thought he was a calm man who didn’t seem suited to rule the Blue Coven known for being such an aggressive coven...”

“Ah, yeah. If I’m not mistaken, they got a new Patriarch two years ago. The current Patriarch is the man who killed the prior Patriarch in a one-on-one battle. The Blue Coven runs completely on the notion of the survival of the fittest—whoever defeats the Patriarch in battle becomes the next Patriarch. From what I heard, this Patriarch was one of the few who actually went as far as killing his predecessor in the match.”

“...Where on Earth did you get a hold of all this information? You claim you were locked up in a laboratory your entire life, but you have common sense and know how to talk normally.”

“Just goes to show even I had someone to talk to.”

“You did?”

“My hypothesis is based on everything I just told you. Naturally, if you don’t believe everything I told you, there will be inconsistencies with it. Anyway, my hypothesis is this: there is a third power targeting Azusa aside from me and you Reds. One that’s not the Blue Coven,” Tsukiharu concluded. Sharp gasps could be heard around the table. Tsukiharu leaned back in his chair and took a sip of his tea as if to signal he was done talking.

Kouya eyed him suspiciously and finally spoke up, “What made you decide to tell us all this? There’s nothing in it for you.”

“I felt like this was the best course of action now that Azusa is with you Reds. She contracted with the Akaoni and her attachments lie with you. Well, in essence, I want you guys to take good care of her until I’m ready to take her away with me. I was willing to wait for that time to come. But I have no idea what exactly it is this third power wants. If they abduct her, I have no clue where they would take her, or what they would do to her. In that case, using you lot seemed like a good idea. You said there’s nothing in it for me, but I told you because of the disadvantages keeping quiet could have,” Tsukiharu explained logically, rendering everyone else without an argument.

Only Tsukiharu casually plucked the sweets off the table and munched on them. Once he confirmed they had nothing else to say, he stood from his seat.

“Tsukiharu?” Azusa quickly called him to stop.

Tsukiharu looked over his shoulder and grinned, “I’m going home since it looks like you’re done questioning me. See you again at school tomorrow, Azusa.”

“Wait.”

“Huh?” Tsukiharu responded less-than-eloquently when Subaru told him to wait just as he turned to leave.

“Let’s call a truce.”

“Subaru?” Ichi grabbed Subaru’s arm with a questioning look. Subaru silently put his hand on Ichi’s and kept his eyes locked on Tsukiharu.

“I want a truce with you. And if possible, I want to share information.”

“What are you going on about?”

“I don’t like you and could never come to like you after what you did. But, if the third power you mentioned really exists, the more people we have fighting on our side the better.”

“Hmm. You’re going to believe what I told you?”

“It doesn’t seem like there would be much benefit for you to lie to us about this stuff. Anyway, this is something I just decided arbitrarily—are the rest of you okay with this?”

Ichi nodded as if she had no other choice, Kouya shrugged with a look of disgust, and Azusa gave a firm nod.

“Obviously, we won’t drop our guard around you, but we will refrain from acting hostile toward you as well. Things will go smoothly if you think before you act too.”

“I guess I’m okay with that.”

Youta returned to the table just as Tsukiharu reluctantly agreed; he must have actually been waiting for the perfect timing.

“I take it you are finished?”

Azusa could no longer see his smile as angelic—*sly fox*.

Chapter 50: Proof of Ownership

CONTRARY to the earlier tension, Azusa now enjoyed a peaceful tea time. Only she and Youta sat at the table, eating the cheesecake she made with relish. The rest of their party members were having a secret strategy meeting in one of the empty rooms inside Youta's manor. Recalling how Tsukiharu went along with them even though he didn't really want to, made Azusa earnestly hope they could all get along someday.

The way they met was beyond terrible, but the Tsukiharu she interacted with as a classmate was genuinely kind, friendly, and someone who got carried away easily. Continuing to ignore him required great mental anguish on her part. Lately, ignoring him made her feel like a bully. She hated herself for it every day.

She had no intention of suddenly becoming best friends with him, but she had more than enough confidence to treat him like a normal classmate now.

"By the way, Azusa, what happened to your neck? Did you hurt it?" Youta asked, pointing to the gauze covering a portion of her neck. The gauze was large enough to cover the palm of someone's hand. A high-collared shirt hid it, but apparently it still caught Youta's eye.

Azusa turned slightly red at his question and avoided meeting his eyes. "I know it's the norm for you vampires, which means there's no point in hiding it, but I find it kind of embarrassing, so I hid it for now... Kouya seems to have forgotten to erase the marks."

"Marks?"

"Marks."

"What? You mean bite marks?"

"Ah, yes."

Azusa tilted her head at Youta's frozen look of disbelief. Azusa remembered hearing on multiple occasions that the act of drinking blood was neither embarrassing nor anything noteworthy. If that was true, why did Youta's face gradually turn a deeper shade of red?

"Youta?"

"I have no idea where to start, but I have just come to understand how taciturn my brother is. Please allow me to apologize on his behalf as his younger brother. I'm sorry."

"What for?"

"I knew Kouya hasn't drunk any blood for a long time, but you would think he would at least keep to the rules. What the heck is he doing making his younger brother apologize for something like this? The worst part is that I know he did it entirely on purpose. I'm ashamed he did it knowing you absolutely wouldn't understand the

meaning behind it. And since when did he become capable of drinking blood again?"

"Um? Don't all vampires do this? It's nothing shameful or embarrassing, right?" Azusa became flustered by Youta's perplexing reaction. Drinking blood wasn't an embarrassing act among vampires—it was their method of eating. With that fact in mind, she couldn't understand the reason behind his reddening face.

"Azusa."

"Yes?"

"It's true the act of drinking blood is nothing especially embarrassing or worth writing home about. The problem at hand is the fact he left the bite marks."

"Is there a problem with the bite marks?"

"Leaving bite marks is a so-called *proof of ownership*. It's like telling other vampires, 'this is my prey, keep your hands off.' Oh my gosh, what the heck am I saying?! I don't want to say stuff like this aloud!"

"Proof of...ownership?"

"It's not an official stamp of ownership, but more like an unspoken understanding? It's got the same meaning as a hickey might among humans."

"A h-h-hi-hick-hickeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeey!" Azusa shouted, turning tomato-red.

Youta quickly jumped in to ease the blow, "Yeah. But Kouya hasn't drunk blood in a long time. Maybe he just happened to forget to erase the marks this time!"

There's a ninety-nine percent chance he did it on purpose though. Youta kept his thoughts to himself.

"Y-You think so? You surprised me! I better get Kouya to erase it for me then!"

"You should."

She believed me.

Youta's expression gradually grew more exasperated as he watched Azusa fan her flushed face. He wasn't exasperated at Azusa who sat across from him, but his absent brother.

He recognized his older brother put a wall between himself and everyone else—no matter whom they were. He may have been on considerably better talking terms with him now compared to when they first met, but not once did he think he had ever gotten past that wall to get a glimpse of his heart. To think he would someday see a piece of who his brother really was in this way.

Youta looked at the spot where the marks lay hidden beneath the gauze and thought how much she must matter to Kouya. At the same time, he was exasperated at how Kouya was trying to keep his

affections hidden from her. Why didn't he even consider trying to make things work? From what he had seen of their interactions, it was evident Azusa wasn't appalled by him, yet he made the extravagant choice of refusing to grab hold of the feelings that were just in reach.

And here I am frantically trying to grab a hold of feelings my hands can never reach. Ichi's dignified and elegant form crossed Youta's mind. *No matter how much I care for her, it's always that Subaru guy who gets to stand by her side. I only invited Ichi to the party today, but he tagged along without seeking my permission first. How many times did I consider sending him away today? But if I did, she would leave too. And this is why I always end up agreeing to let him be around.* Youta shook his head to shake off the bad thoughts before they depressed him further.

He turned to face Azusa again, only to find her happily stuffing her face with cake. Apparently, she internally labeled the *proof of evidence* as something Kouya innocently forgot to erase.

"Say, Azusa, would you mind letting me take a look at the marks?"

"Hm? Sure, but I don't think it will be particularly interesting?" Azusa undid her collar and removed the gauze without any hesitation. Youta froze for the second time.

He slammed his right hand against his reddening face and groaned, "My brother is an idiot."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Kouya probably just forgot. Maybe it's best for you to wait for it to heal naturally? Also, even if you get him to erase the marks, you should leave the gauze on for a while."

"What? Why?"

"...Why, you ask? ...Because it's a two-tiered trap?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind! At any rate, you better keep the gauze on for about a week. Even if he erases the marks! Please!"

"O-Okay?" Azusa reluctantly agreed, bringing Youta immense relief.

Youta thought back to what he saw while she covered the marks. Beneath the gauze were two holes in line with the fang marks left by sucking her blood. Under the fang marks was a distinctly red, swollen mark—a real hickey. Even if Azusa asked Kouya to heal the marks, he would most likely heal only the fang marks and leave the hickey there for all to see. From what Youta could judge, someone with little to no experience with men like Azusa wouldn't be able to determine the red swelling as a hickey. And Kouya knew that.

Youta was saddened by the fact Kouya badly wanted to leave proof she was his, yet wouldn't say anything about his feelings to her. It was almost as if he had given up from the start.

Chapter 51: Subaru

Subaru's POV

WE entered into a sudden truce with that Tsukiharuru brat. It was actually only a verbal agreement added to our promise to share valuable information, meaning we won't be letting down our guard around him. The truce allowed me to focus on completing my work for the Shiranui Family and finally drop by the mansion Azusa lives in. I hadn't dropped by the mansion since the day Ichi found Azusa sleeping in Kouya's room. It felt like forever since I last stopped by.

I went first thing in the morning, because I wanted to see Ichi as soon as possible. I arrived at 5:30 a.m. I unlocked the entrance and slowly opened the door. I assumed no one would be up this early, but my expectations were betrayed in the best way.

There she stood in the hallway seen from the lounge I had entered. Her quick gait sent her usually tightly tied back hair swaying. I'm always captivated by how she keeps her posture perfect to the T, even in the wee hours of the morning.

Now that I had her in my sights, I couldn't let her go without greeting her, "Hitoka!"

She turned, her tight ponytail fluttering behind her with the movement.

Are those eggs in her hand? And why is she wearing an apron?

"Subaru? How many times, may I ask, have I requested you not to call me by my real name?"

"My bad. But it looks like it's just us here right now. No problem in saying it now, right? You look cute today too," I complimented with a grin.

"There is no hope for you," my beloved returned with a laugh.

She's cute. She is always so mature, which makes her youthful smile all the more tantalizing.

"While I may be cute, you will lose your chance at love if you continue to use those lines on your younger sister."

I deeply resented the fact she is my younger sister by adoption.

I, Subaru Shiranui, am in love with Hitoka Shiranui.

And I have been since the day it was decided the Shiranui Family would take me in...

"You're up early today, Ichi. Or are you always up at this time?" I asked to change the topic from who I love—I didn't want to lie to

her about it. The eggs she held caught my curiosity.

"I guess I am. Lately, I have been making breakfast with Azusa, which has me getting up around this time every morning."

"You are cooking?"

"Don't be rude, Subaru. You just thought I cannot cook, didn't you? Not that you are wrong, but I believe I have become decent at it recently. Azusa is a good teacher."

"Cool. I bet you will make a great wife someday. Would you be willing to cook me breakfast sometime?"

"For you, Subaru, I would cook anytime. Oh, would you like to eat with us today? I believe we can still add extra for more people at this stage," Ichi happily suggested.

"I would love to," I accepted with a grin.

Ichi nodded merrily and turned on her heel toward the kitchen. I followed her from behind.

Ichi is cute in an apron too, I casually thought, just as *that* scene suddenly unfolded before my eyes.

My best friend opened his mouth and made a cute, "Aah," sound as he was fed.

My brain stopped working at the absurd scene I was witnessing. On the other side of the open kitchen door, Azusa was feeding Kou. You know, the act where couples lovingly feed each other? Their case was a one-sided feeding, not feeding each other, but my eyes met with Kou's as he bent down to take a bite of some freshly baked sweet Azusa was holding.

Did he just nibble on her fingertip?

"A very good morning to you," the shock got me greeting them like we were in some 1920's period piece.

"You're here?" is all Kou said with his trademark lack of expression. I could read the unspoken question of, "Why do you look so surprised?" from his pose.

"Azusa!" Ichi, having a hard time stomaching the situation, jumped in to chide Azusa, "Is that not the dessert meant to be eaten after breakfast? We will run out before we even get a chance to eat it like we did last time because you continue giving it to Kouya!"

"Don't worry! I've been making extra just for Kouya lately!"

"You have been? As for you, Kouya, either quit snacking on our food before it is ready and help out, or go somewhere with Subaru!" she demanded in a foul mood.

She said they ran out before, which probably means this keeps happening... My thoughts were interrupted again because I spotted Kou quietly whispering in Azusa's ear.

"Does tonight work for you?"

Whoa, that's far enough!

Azusa bashfully nodded.

What the heck happened between them? Something had to have happened! I just know it! What should I do if they crossed the proverbial line?! Not that there's anything to be done about it, but still!

I grabbed Kou's collar when he came my way at Ichi's insistence. I didn't want to get into a brawl with him or anything like that, but I had to take action after what I had witnessed.

"I have something to discuss with you."

"Huh?"

"Let's go to my room. It's good to have a chat like the best friends we are."

"Chat about what? You can just say it here."

"I don't think this is a very good spot to talk about it!"

I yanked Kou by the collar, leaving him no other choice but to be dragged into my room. I got him to sit on the couch, a skeptical scowl on his face.

I lowered my voice and cut to the chase, "What happened?"

"What are you talking about? Explain so I can understand what's going on here."

"Did something happen between you and Azusa?"

"....."

"....."

"...Nothing happened."

"Say so immediately then! You're a lost cause as a liar! What the heck was that earlier? I thought I was daydreaming when I saw you being lovingly fed! And what was with that whole, 'does tonight work for you?' line? What're you planning on doing with her tonight? Don't tell me you've crossed that line!"

"There's nothing for you to worry about."

"I'll believe you! I can believe you, right?! It's true I jokingly asked if you were in love with her before, but it's okay for me to believe you have no such feelings for her, yeah?!"

"...I don't."

"Then don't pause before you answer! How terrible of a liar can you be?"

My shoulders shook with heavy breathing and I collapsed back into the couch.

I get the feeling I've picked up on the situation here. In other words, it's that—something like love. I knew it, was all I could think.

I had a hunch this would happen sooner or later. I want nothing more than for them to find happiness together. My best friend is skilled at letting go of happiness. It would be a very happy moment for me if he tried to become happy—if he desired to find happiness.

“So? What was your little whisper about?”

“.....”

“If you don’t answer me, I’ll seriously take it as you’re going into her room to make love!”

“.....”

“Anybody home?” I quipped at his silence.

“...I’m getting blood.”

“Huh?”

“Like I said, I’m getting blood from her,” Kou snapped.

I finally understood what was going on. The first words out of my mouth were, “Glad to hear it.”

Some years after we became friends I asked him, “Why don’t you drink blood?”

Kou forced a bitter smile as he said, “I can’t drink blood.” After he said that, he told me a bit about his past. At the end of his story, he smiled and said, “After enduring the regular impulses to drink for years, the thirst stopped altogether.”

He was shortening his own life. I could instinctively tell. A vampire refusing to drink blood is no different from a human committing suicide by refusing to eat and drink.

He was stronger and more feared than anyone else, yet he was chiseling away at his lifespan that should have been longer than most. He had accepted his fate. He once told me with a smile, “I don’t mind dying sooner.”

Kou hadn’t let go of his life yet, but he wasn’t attached to it either. I punched him more than once for the way he wasted his life. No matter how much I yelled and punched him, his stance never changed.

“It’s inevitable because I can’t get the blood down.”

How many times has he frustrated me by brushing everything under the rug with that one line?

The first thought that came to mind when I heard he drank Azusa’s blood during the fight with Tsukiharu was to make her his contractor. Of course, I always thought she should contract with someone to make the task of guarding her easier, but Kou was never on my list. However, things changed once he actually drank her blood. I planted the idea in her head, resulting in a contract between them. But Kou still chose not to drink her blood.

I honestly gave up for real this time. I couldn’t force it on him.

Kou’s life must have been miserable enough for him to never get attached to living.

And then this happened on the precipice of me giving up for good.

I couldn’t stop myself from punching him in the head. I hit him

the same way he always hits me.

“Ow,” he groaned with a disgruntled look.

“Good for you,” I said.

“...Yeah,” he said with a slight nod.

I ruffled the hair on his head. And then it hit me.

“You haven’t gone on a wild rampage, right? You went crazy the first time you drank Azusa’s blood, didn’t you? Does that mean you are taking it in moderation?” I asked.

Kou lightly shook his head. “I probably won’t go on a rampage with her blood now. It’s a completely different quality blood from the lab sample.”

“Completely different? You mean you drank someone else’s blood at the laboratory then?”

“No. I got a different feeling when I drank her blood during the fight with Tsukiharu too. The flavor doesn’t change, but it’s like the quality does.”

“So the quality and nature of her blood changes depending on the time and situation? We’ve just stumbled on a monumental discovery here. Guess we should expect as much from the Ancient’s blood.”

“Subaru, I’m sure you already know this, but—”

“I know. I won’t report back on this. The most likely candidate for our third enemy is the nobles in the higher positions of power in our coven right now. I won’t do anything thoughtless.”

The look of relief on Kou’s face probably came from concern for Azusa. I could tell he was trying to decrease the chance of her being put in harm’s way and decided to have a little fun with him.

“All right, shall we exchange love stories now, Kou?” I laughed.

He punched me through the wall, leaving me to moan in pain with a look of utmost disgust as he left the room.

Chapter 52: Love Talk

AZUSA finished breakfast and returned to her room to get ready for school. She still had an hour before she needed to leave. With nothing better to do, she decided to clarify something she had been curious about for a while, and stared intently at her dictionary.

“To have...a yen for something...let’s see...”

“Is something wrong, Azusa? Why are you looking at a dictionary? Are you going to start on your homework now?”

“No, I was trying to look up something that’s been on my mind—Ichi?”

“I knocked. You did not respond, but I sensed you were inside, so I took the liberty of coming in without permission. Should I not have?”

“No, you did nothing wrong. No problem there. Actually, you came at a good time.” Despite being surprised by Ichi’s sudden appearance, Azusa held the dictionary out to her.

“Could you help me look for the saying, ‘to have a yen for something’?”

“...I’m sorry. I do not understand what you mean.”

“You see, one of my classmates once asked me, ‘I heard from my parents that the Akaoni has a yen for someone. Is that true?’ I didn’t know what the saying meant at the time, and then it was kind of pushed aside with Tsukiharu’s sudden appearance, leaving me stuck wondering what my classmate meant...”

“I thought I should use my spare time right now to look up the word, but I don’t know how to use a physical dictionary to look up phrases. I’m having a hard time finding it. Akaoni refers to Kouya, right? I’d hate for bad rumors to spread because I can’t refute them... Actually, it would be faster if I ask you. Do you know what it means for someone to have a yen for someone else? Yen is not related to money, right?”

“I’m sorry. I am not well-read, so I do not know what the phrase means. I can help you look it up in the dictionary though.”

“Thank you! That would be a big help!”

Azusa and Ichi began flipping through the dictionary. They surprisingly found it without much hassle.

Yen: A noun. To have a craving; to yearn. To secretly long for something or someone.

“This is probably the one we want if we are discounting the monetary definition.”

“If he is secretly longing for someone, does that mean he’s in love?”

“What? Who is in love?”

“Kouya is?”

“Kouya is in love with someone?”

“.....”

“.....”

“WHAAAT?!” both girls cried out, dropping the dictionary as if it were infested with bugs. The dictionary thudded against the hardwood floor.

“This is not plausible. How could *that* Kouya fall in love with anyone? That man is the most unsuited for love and anything related to love. He is the number one least likely person in the world to get attached to someone.”

“You rag pretty hard on Kouya, don’t you, Ichi? This is a what-if situation, you know? Like what if he is in love? Oh my gosh! You’re right! I can’t imagine it either! What kind of person would he even fall for?”

“Don’t you think he would be in a mature relationship? Like they would both keep a proper distance from each other and never lose their heads over their love!”

“Totally! I get what you mean! I didn’t think you would be into love talk and relationship stuff!”

“Now that is very rude of you, Azusa. I may not look like it, but I am a proper woman! My favorite magazine to read is Shoujo Beets!”

“Oh my gosh! No way! We might have the same interests! Let me see your copy sometime! I haven’t read any manga or light novels since coming to this town! I didn’t even know we could get magazines here!”

“Of course we can! I will bring my copy over later! Oh, but, are you okay?”

“Okay with what?”

“Azusa, you like Kouya, don’t you?”

“Pardon?”

“You like Kouya, right? You seem happy Kouya has affection for someone, but are you all right with that?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

“I like Kouya?”

“Am I wrong?”

“Uh...” Azusa froze as if she were turned to stone.

He has countlessly helped me and saved my life on several occasions, but I never once thought of him in that way. I won’t deny I feel safe with him and find myself feeling giddy when he smiles. But the same applies to Ichi and Subaru.

“Wh-Why do you think so?”

"You seem to have the most fun when you are with Kouya."

"I have fun with you and Subaru too!"

"Do you want to deny it, Azusa? Please try thinking about it this way then. Say Kouya truly is in love with someone else and comes to you one day saying he wants to annul his contract with you to contract with her instead. How would you feel about that?"

"....."

"Furthermore, he tells you he can no longer be your bodyguard because he wants to protect her forever instead. How does that feel?"

"....."

"If you are still fine, my prior statement was a misunderstanding on my half. Well, if the look on your face is anything to go by, it was not a misunderstanding."

"...What look do I have?"

"You look sad and lonely."

"I see..."

Even Azusa was conscious of the terrible state her face was in after imagining the scenario for real. She felt a little like crying after picturing Kouya and some pretty woman walking away intimately holding hands, leaving her behind.

"Do you think I like Kouya?"

"I believe so."

Azusa became aware of her feelings after having them pointed out. Her body grew hot, as if all her blood was boiling, and her ears turned bright-red. Realizing her feelings for him gave her the nagging hunch all her actions until then were grounded in those feelings.

The heat cooled the instant she remembered the conversation she had with Ichi—the rumors about him being in love with someone.

If Kouya is in love with someone, the day I realized I love him will be the day I find myself with an unrequited love. I could fight off anyone who's in love with him, but there's no beating the woman he loves. The most I can do is work hard to get him to notice me more than her.

"...Do you think Kouya is in love with someone?"

"Are you referring to the rumor, 'the infamous Akaoni has a yen for someone'? I believe it is nothing more than a rumor. He is a magnet for weird rumors. The rumor this time is a tad unique, but why don't you ask him directly if it bothers you?"

"What exactly do I ask him?"

"Isn't it fine to take the simple approach and ask, 'do you love anyone right now?'"

"...I can't ask that."

"Please try to!" Ichi encouraged with her fists clenched.

Azusa felt bad for Ichi, who was cheering for her, but she didn't have the guts to ask such a bold question. And, at any rate, she had

only just become aware of her feelings. She had a hunch it was all a misunderstanding. True, she had feelings for him, but she still didn't know whether those were feelings for a friend or for someone of the opposite sex.

There was a light knock on the door.

"Oh? I wonder who it is."

"Isn't it Kouya? Speak of the devil and he comes."

"It can't be him. It's still thirty minutes earlier than our usual time to leave. It's not Kouya—"

"Did you call for me?"

Azusa froze the moment she opened the door and her eyes met Kouya's—the very man she couldn't stop thinking about. Her body temperature skyrocketed when he looked at her, his expression no different from usual.

"K-K-Ko-Kou-Kouya! What do you need?!"

"...Are you okay?"

"Yes! I'm okay! A-okay! Okay-dokey! As well as a whistle!" Azusa exclaimed, raising both fists in a fighting pose. Something cold suddenly touched her forehead. Her body temperature was on the rocket and ready to explode by the time she realized it was his hand.

Paying no heed to her reaction, Kouya caressed her cheeks between his hands and cocked his head.

"You feel a bit warm. Do you have a fever? I would prefer if you did. Want to stay home today?"

"You would prefer if I did?"

"Yeah. I can get through the day without wasting time worrying about Tsukiharu. You can stay with me all day today."

"I'm hearing thingsssss!" Azusa shouted.

"Huh?"

"Pay no attention to me. Ahem. I apologize for losing my cool. I am in perfect health! Are we going to school already? Early today, huh?!"

Oh gosh, I can't believe I thought I heard him say something like, "you can stay with me all day today." A girl in love is scary! A brain in love is scary! A brain deluded by love is scary!

"It's a bit early, but I thought it'd be nice to slowly walk there. I doubt many people are out at this time and I want to talk to you about some things."

"HAHAHA! Sounds kinda like a date!"

What the heck did I just SAY?! DID I JUST SAY THAT?!

Azusa frantically swung her arms around to distract from what she blurted out due to the heat rising to her head, but Kouya showed no signs of being bothered by it. His eyes did widen slightly, followed by a look of thoughtful contemplation.

“Good idea. Will you go on a date with me?”

Chapter 53: On the Way to School

AZUSA and Kouya took a detour from their normal school route to walk through a deserted park. They always left early for school because of how much Kouya hated to be in the public eye. Today they left thirty minutes earlier than their usual time, which led to the concern the school gates wouldn't even be open yet if they headed straight there; hence the detour.

Kouya rambled on about something during their walk, but it went through one ear and out the other for Azusa who sighed upon looking at his face.

Upon closer inspection, Kouya is—actually without even needing to take a close look—very handsome and suave. I wonder why I never noticed until now...

“...That's why you need to be cautious with people from the Red Coven as well as the Blue Coven. Are you even listening to me?”

“Pardon?”

“I thought we were having an important conversation. Was I mistaken?” Kouya sighed, learning Azusa had zoned him out. He wasn't particularly angry, but his exasperation got a flustered apology out of her.

“I'm so sorry! It's okay! I was somewhat listening! We were discussing how the Red Coven's nobles are suspicious, right?”

“Yeah. That covers about all of it. Anyway, are you really okay? Are you sure you aren't sick?”

“I'm okay! A-okay!” Azusa blushed and evaded Kouya as he leaned in to get a better look at her face. She rapidly fanned her face with her hand to bring down the heat. Her behavior perplexed Kouya, but he continued on in his usual tone.

“From now on, even if you show any new changes, I don't plan on reporting more than the bare necessity to get by without suspicion. I intend to continue doing so until we learn who the third party Tsukiharuru mentioned is.”

“What? You won't report more to Mr. Akashi either then?”

“Yeah. I have no intentions of reporting more to the Patriarch than what is necessary to avoid arousing his suspicion.”

Surprised, Azusa turned to look at Kouya. She knew full-well that Kouya reported back about her status on a weekly basis. But she was at a loss for words when she learned he felt even Akashi—his own father—wasn't trustworthy.

“For now, only put your trust in us and doubt everyone else. The Patriarch included.”

“Is it okay to be doing this? Won't they say something or punish

you guys for it later?”

“This is only until we learn who the third enemy is. Once we know, I’ll gather all the information I held back into one report and submit it. From the start, the only reason we thought the Blue Coven attacked you was because of firm orders from the top declaring it was them. Plus, the information about your kidnapping came from the top-ranked nobles as well. They had no information on you before, yet they suddenly knew about your kidnapping. Isn’t it only natural to doubt them?”

“But you don’t have to go as far as doubting your father! Aren’t the Patriarch’s opinions and orders basically the law in this town? Will you be okay? What about your position?”

“I’m not saying the Patriarch is behind it. I’m simply keeping a tight lock on the information because we don’t know where it will leak from. As for the last part, I’m no longer in a position I need to worry about. I’m merely the Patriarch’s son and someone with enough ability to be forced with the job of disposing Fs. There won’t be much issue if I’m gone,” Kouya stated with his usual indifference.

Azusa was speechless. She clenched her fists at the way he seemed to feel nothing about it.

“Forgive me, Kouya!” Azusa said, following up the comment with a slap to his cheek. A dull smack resounded through the quiet park.

“...!”

“I’ve thought this for a long time now, but you bad talk yourself way too much, Kouya! I said before that I don’t want you to die, didn’t I? I don’t want you to disappear either. I also don’t want you to feel sad or be pained by anything! And yet you never care about yourself! Please think a little about the people who care about you!” Azusa shouted. She breathed heavily from saying it all with one breath.

A few seconds passed before she returned to reality and the color drained from her face. She timidly looked up to find Kouya’s eyes as wide as saucers with sheer amazement.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah! I am so sorry! Did it hurt?!”

“No, I’m fine. I’m the one at fault here.”

“But! But still! I hit you!”

“Subaru often tells me not to say this kind of stuff too. It’s my fault for not being more careful with my words. Must have been uncomfortable for you,” Kouya said, forcing a smile. Azusa grabbed a fist full of his shirt and yanked him toward her.

“That is not the issue here! You have got the wrong idea! Neither of us are saying we don’t want to hear you say that because it makes us uncomfortable! We don’t want you to think like that! We want you to think more about yourself! So...um...you see...”

Kouya looked down at her as she struggled to find what to say

next, and smiled. His large hand plopped onto her head.

“Thank you.”

Azusa looked up. Her eyes met Kouya’s. Her vision filled with his troubled yet happy expression—her face instantly turned bright-red. She released her grip on his shirt and tried to take a step back from him, but his hand shifted from patting her head to wrapping behind it to stop her from leaving.

“Azu—”

“Azusa!” Someone called out from behind them, cutting off whatever Kouya was about to say. He let go of Azusa and took a step back to put a little distance between them. They looked in the direction of the voice to find two female students. The girls were running toward them in their school uniforms.

“Oh, I knew it was you, Azusa! Why are you so early?”

“Yuu! Kii! Are you on class duty today?” Azusa asked.

“Yup! You got that right! To make matters worse, we have an experiment to do in first period today of all days, you know? So I thought I should get the equipment ready.”

“I’m just tagging along with Yuu. Our houses are absurdly close after all. Couldn’t let her go alone.”

“You two have it rough today.”

Kouya slowly turned his back on the three girls.

“Kou—”

“Go the rest of the way with your classmates. You should be safe this close to the school. Don’t worry, I’ll come running to your side again if anything happens,” Kouya said, placing his index finger to his lips to stop her from saying his name.

He patted her on the head several times with his other hand. The girls hadn’t figured out the man beside her was the Akaoni. Azusa could easily see his apprehension over the unnecessary fuss if they recognized him.

But, Azusa thought, why is he the only one who has to constantly endure everything? Why must he live out of sight? No one ever told Kouya he had to live that way. He chose this path. But his circumstances forced him to pick this road. I agree it’s a bad idea to frighten them for no reason. I understand what he’s trying to do, but it’s a different story to ask me to just let it slip.

Azusa practically lunged at Kouya’s arm to grab hold of it before he could leave, and turned to face her classmates who were talking nearby.

“Um, let me introduce you. This is Kouya, the person who contracted with me!”

“Hey!”

“What?” the girls said in unison.

“He escorts me to and from school every day out of worry! He is a very kind person!”

Azusa wrapped her arm even tighter around Kouya’s and dragged him with her to her classmates who were paralyzed with fear.

Chapter 54: On the Way to School 2

“UH, Azusa, are you joking?” The more assertive of the two girls, Kii, asked with a wary tone.

Azusa shook her head and took another step closer to the girls, pulling Kouya along with her. Yuu, the peppier one, took a step back as Azusa tried to close the distance between them.

“Eek!”

“Hey, quit this nonsense.”

“Ah!”

Annoyed, Kouya pulled his arm out of Azusa’s death-grip, sighed, and took several steps back from the girls.

“What good comes from scaring them?”

“But don’t you hate being a source of fear for no reason? Did you know you have become an urban legend used to frighten children by saying you will show up at their bedside if they don’t go to sleep when they are told? Are you okay with going down in history like that? As some kind of boogeyman?”

“You’re putting me on par with the Boogeyman? I’m not inconvenienced by the way they view me. You don’t need to let it bother you.”

“It does bother me! I’m deeply troubled by it! You are a boogeyman! The Boogeyman! I had to laugh at that one, you know? The boys in my class were gossiping about how you can blow away mountains. Wait, can you possibly blow mountains away at your full-strength?”

“As if I could! What fairytale monster are you confusing me with? Anyway, you should just ignore the rumors and gossip. They’ll go away on their own.”

“They aren’t going away on their own, which is why the rumors are bringing about more exaggerated rumors! I understand how much of a pain it is to deal with them, but you should seriously consider fixing your image! Let’s start by having you proactively come into the public eye so people can see you aren’t just the creature hiding in their closet waiting to peel the flesh off them!”

“Do you realize the brutality of your plan? I’ll get the brunt of the blow, but there will definitely be harm done to those who see me too! I don’t get the point of bringing about such mayhem!”

“Don’t jump to conclusions! My thought is that there will be people who understand. You are a great guy, Kouya! You get 100 points for kindness! Look, I will protect you, Kouya, so let’s go into the public eye together!”

“I’m happy hearing how highly you view me, but I firmly refuse

to do it. Besides, I'd get it if I was protecting you, but why do I have to be protected by you—"

"AH! You think I can't do anything, don't you?! I've got enough spunk to take on anyone who dares to slander you, Kouya!"

"I know! I more than understand you have enough spunk to do that and then some! So I'm begging you, don't do it!"

"Haha!" Kii's laughter interrupted the banter between them. Azusa and Kouya turned to look at her. "Sorry! Sorry! I was just completely taken by surprise! Azusa, let me ask you one more time: is this man really the one they call Akaoni?"

"What? Yes, he is. But I don't like that title very much."

"Okay, then I'll call him Kouya too. Um, is that all right with you?"

"...You can call me what you like," Kouya responded, uncertain of how to assess the situation. Kii's smile brightened with relief.

"Um, I understand now that Kouya isn't as scary as the rumors make him out to be. He really is a normal person, huh? I heard his eyes were naturally red, but...are they hidden behind color contacts?" Kii asked.

"Yup. He seems to wear color contacts whenever he picks me up and drops me off. You should have him show you his eyes sometime! They are beautiful, like rubies!" Azusa exclaimed.

"Nah, I'm fully confident I'll faint on the spot, so I'll just take your word for it. You might not get it, Azusa, but vampires are fairly sensitive to a power difference pecking order. It's possible I'll pass out if I see his red eyes up close and personal. Apparently, it won't have the same effect from a distance."

"Really? I didn't know that," Azusa nodded understandingly. Kouya poked her from behind. She turned toward him to see what was up, only for her eyes to fall on what he was pointing at.

"Oh no! Yuu!"

Her other classmate had collapsed on the ground, foaming at the mouth. Azusa quickly ran over to her. Kii shrugged beside Kouya, showing no sign of going to help Yuu.

"Tell her I'm sorry for scaring her when she wakes up," Kouya said to her.

"Why don't you tell her yourself? I'm sure that is what Azusa would want you to do."

"I doubt she can hold a conversation with me. Besides, it's not my intention to senselessly scare people."

"Well, yeah. I guess Yuu needs a little more time."

"I'll leave her to you then."

"Sure thing. But, while it will take some time, I believe she will come to understand you aren't as scary as the rumors say, Kouya. That

applies to both Yuu and the others. Why don't you just quietly let Azusa protect you?"

"....."

"Sorry," Yuu apologized to the scowling Kouya and ran over to help Azusa get Yuu on her back. "Azusa, let Kouya escort you the rest of the way to school! I'm heading straight for the school nurse's office with Yuu!"

"Will you be okay alone?"

"I'm fine! See you later!" Kii stood up with Yuu on her back and proceeded toward school with amusement.

"Don't want divine punishment for standing in the way of true love," Kii whispered quiet enough for no one to hear, grinning from ear to ear.

"I thought Kii would understand."

"The other one fainted though. We're at the school."

"We need to take every challenge in stride! Thank you very much."

Kouya and Azusa stopped in front of the school gate. No one was around, but people would be coming soon enough.

"Will you be here for me after school too?"

"Yeah."

"I look forward to it then! See you later!"

"Azusa!" Kouya grabbed Azusa's hand before she could leave for the school building. His expression was a weird mix of apprehension and irritation. She stopped and cocked her head at Kouya.

"Don't do what you did today again. Don't openly talk about me at school either. You probably can't hide your connection to me because word of the contract has spread, but do your best to hide your opinion of me."

"...I don't want to."

"Just do what I say."

"Don't! Want! To!"

"I'm worried about you."

"I know you are. You are very kind after all. Did you know I'm surprisingly resilient? I will be fine!" Azusa smiled, easily pulling her hand from his and disappearing into the school.

Chapter 55: The Moon That Illuminates a Dark Night

Tsukiharu's POV

STERILE white walls and a pristine white ceiling. A cold space filled only with a bare bed and simple desk. The room existed for the sole purpose of resting the body forced to take part in experiments from first light until the wee hours of the night.

Today too, I simply live without lamenting the endless days spent together with excruciating pain. Lamentation is a feeling that occurs when you know of something better. I have never experienced anything else. What is there for me to regret? My lifestyle hasn't changed since the day I was born. All I have ever been given is daily nourishment and the clothes on my back.

The day of my disposal was decided recently. Apparently, it will be the day I turn seventeen. I overheard the researchers whispering about it in a corner. I have to wonder though—what reason do they have to hide it? It's not like I am going to resist. Death is peace for me.

If I were asked whether I'm scared to die or not, I can say I'm exhilarated by the prospects of going somewhere I've never been before, but the feeling known as fear is foreign to me.

After all, my mind will be devoured on my twentieth birthday, turning me into a monster. I'll be disposed of then anyway. Things are merely happening three years earlier than planned.

Now that I think about it, when do I turn seventeen? I don't know the day I was born. Well, not like it matters, I thought and snatched one of the books off the tall stack on the desk.

Reading was the only recreational activity allowed in that sterile space. I was grateful they would retrieve any book I requested. I didn't know what types of books existed in the first place, so all I could do was vaguely request things like, "a book with a story" or "a book that teaches the reader how to calculate".

I would read during the hours leading up to the next experiment or for the entire day when they didn't need me. No one ever taught me how to read, write, or do math, so I taught myself everything from the knowledge held within the pages of books. Apparently, people the same age as me, were they raised normally, attend something called a

school. Wanting to know what school was like, I requested textbooks. Taking on the difficult new information was fun, like solving a puzzle. It didn't take long to understand everything contained within textbooks meant for high school seniors.

My life changed when a researcher known as Hiragi became my caretaker. Unlike all the other researchers who treated me like an infectious blight, he was a strange man who interacted with me like a parent and a friend.

He was the one who gave me a name.

"Tsukiharu? That is the noun I am to be distinguished by?"

"It's a name. I went with a name that means, 'the moon that illuminates a dark night'. You are welcome to use my last name should you ever need one. Isn't it insipid to go by Three all the time?"

They called me Three at the laboratory. I assumed they meant it as Number Three, but I never met a One or a Two. They might have been disposed of already. Just like I am to be disposed of soon.

"I don't need it. I'm going to die soon anyway. Besides, you're the only one who talks to me and I'm the only one here—you can get my attention with just hey or you," I said with casual disinterest. I still remember the sad look on his face as he placed his large hand on my head and ruffled my hair.

He truly was an odd person. It would be one thing if he only talked to me like I was a normal person, but he went as far as teaching me common sense. He even told me all sorts of things about what they were researching and what the Blue Coven was. From him, I learned for the first time that I am a vampire. They drilled into my head that I have *the Ancient's body*, but I had no idea what this Ancient was, nor did I try to comprehend it. They also informed me about the fact I would go insane and turn into a monster around my twentieth birthday, but I always thought that was because of their experiments.

Hiragi was the one who told me the most important information of all.

"What? I have another half?"

"You do. You were born with the Ancient's body, while she was born with the Ancient's blood. We don't know where she is right now, but I'm certain you will meet her someday."

"...Hey, Mister, will that person become my family?" I asked the question that curiously came to mind right away.

I never thought I wanted a family before. For me, family was something akin to the characters that appear in a novel—nothing more than a fictional existence. But if I did have another half, someone who grew up in the same environment as me, they might become my family. Even if we aren't blood related, we could develop a relationship where we care about each other...

He must have caught onto my thoughts, because Hiragi's expression softened and his voice took on a gentle tone, "Who knows? You won't know until you meet her. But I'm sure you will be able to meet her someday. I'm certain you are destined to. So why don't we look forward to that day?"

I clenched at my chest, as a feeling similar to being struck by lightning hit me.

He probably told me about her to encourage me not to give up on life—he actually succeeded too.

It was then I thought I didn't want to die for the first time in my life. I wouldn't die until I met her.

The day of my disposal came immediately after. It seems like Hiragi desperately tried to stop them, but it was all in vain as they brought me to the gas chamber.

But it was too late—I was no longer the same boy content with being offed by them. After all, I swore to myself I wouldn't die until I met her. She was the first connection to this world I ever had in my eternal solitude. I entrusted myself to the power overflowing from within, and destroyed the laboratory to escape with little effort.

"Thanks, Mister," I said with a faint smile when I spotted him among the researchers looking up at me flying in the sky. I decided to take his last name.

I nimbly flapped the wings on my back and took in the world outside the laboratory for the first time. I had never seen the stars and moon with the naked eye until then. And then I met him.

A silver-haired man stood within the veil of darkness. He waited for me with a smirk.

"I had planned on going to retrieve you, but I fear I must apologize for not making it in time. I shall be your servant from this day forth." He ignored my silence at his sudden proclamation and continued, "If you will do me the honor of allowing me to serve at your feet, I shall bestow what you most desire upon you."

"And what is that?"

"Do you know about your other half?"

I gasped. He held his hand out to me.

"Please refer to me as Shiro. Let us be on our way. I have prepared a hidden house for us."

Some time later, I found her—my other half.

Chapter 56: Last Invitation

THE bell signaling lunch break rang. Azusa grabbed her lunch and took the stairs leading to the rooftop where Tsukiharu and Youta were waiting for her.

The day they decided to have a truce with Tsukiharu, he agreed on the condition Azusa would join him for lunch every day. Kouya was completely opposed to the idea, but Subaru intervened by adding the condition he couldn't force Azusa to have lunch if she didn't want to and that their time together would still be watched, allowing the truce to form with Tsukiharu's condition in place. Since then, eating lunch with Tsukiharu and Youta became a daily ritual. If she were to be honest with herself, not an ounce of fear toward Tsukiharu was left in her.

Azusa arrived at the top of the stairs and called out to the familiar back on the other side of the open rooftop door.

"Sorry for the wait—oh? Where is Youta?"

"You didn't hear? Youta's coming of age ceremony is coming up soon, so he went home early to get ready for it. He was all pumped up because the Patriarch is going to be present for it."

"I see. So it's just you and me for lunch?"

"Ooh, what's this? Are you finally aware of my charms?"

"Nah, I was just wondering if I should skip today to keep from dealing with an angry Kouya later."

"...You can't be swayed, huh?" Tsukiharu said with a nauseated expression.

Azusa sat beside him laughing as she opened her lunch box. Tsukiharu tilted his head in astonishment.

"Has anyone ever told you that you lack caution, Azusa?"

"Hm? Why? Do I need to be cautious?!"

"No. It's weird for me to be the one saying this, but even you admitted it's just the two of us today... Are you okay with that? I was prepared to eat lunch alone..."

While Azusa had been eating with Tsukiharu and Youta a lot lately, she had never eaten with just Tsukiharu before. He was aware of the fact he had frightened her more than once. Even Azusa had noticed his careful attempts to avoid ending up alone with her more than necessary. He was responsible for inviting Youta to lunch every day too.

"What? Oh no! Are you planning on doing something to me?" Azusa joked. She saw panic flash across Tsukiharu's face and thought it was a fresh look on him.

"I won't! I won't! I don't want to do anything to upset you either."

Well, that might sound hollow from the guy who kidnapped and locked you up.”

“You realize what you did was wrong though, right? I know you won’t do anything bad to me again,” Azusa smiled. She looked at a speechless Tsukiharu in the eye.

This was the first time she had ever seen him flustered. Coupled with his earlier panic, she felt like she was seeing a new side to him. It was rare for the always aloof Tsukiharu to have anything but a smile plastered on his face.

Tsukiharu’s behavior was enough evidence to show he regretted what he did to her. His soft demeanor grew kinder than before, and she didn’t see much of the sneer he used when he looked down on people. His aloof personality hadn’t changed, but he started following up his snarky statements with more considerate lines now. His attitude toward Kouya and Subaru was the same as always. At the very least, his attitude showed he wanted to make things up to Azusa.

“...Youta scolded me. He said, ‘I don’t know what you did, but considering how angry Kouya is, you’re probably the one at fault, yeah? Azusa will seriously hate your guts if you don’t show remorse for what you did.’ And then he added, ‘Men who can’t be kind to girls are the scum of this Earth!’ with a smile.”

“You’re surprisingly weak when it comes to Youta, huh?”

“...Apparently, we’re friends. I thought it wouldn’t hurt to take his advice.” Tsukiharu bashfully turned his face away from her, exposing the back of his red ears. Azusa couldn’t hold back her laughter. He puffed out his cheeks. The next minute, his demeanor shifted to seriousness. “To be honest, I think that I did something bad to you now. But I believe the me at the time would have made the same choice no matter how many times I could redo it. I was desperate...”

“Your time limit is three years?” Azusa asked carefully.

Tsukiharu slowly shook his head. “Honestly, the reason I gave you before was a pretense. I admit I thought I could live a little longer if I regularly received your blood. But think about it? Drinking your blood isn’t going to make the blood my body naturally produces change from human to the Ancient’s. My body won’t turn human either. There’s no way I can accomplish the research necessary to convert my blood to the Ancient’s within three years with no sponsor or support, even if you let me study you. The only thing I had in mind was the possibility of keeping my sanity longer by drinking your blood.”

“Really? Then why did—”

“I’m not scared of becoming an F rank monster or of dying. I have every intention of ending my life should time continue to pass

with no change in my fate of turning into a monster. I'm repelled by the notion of having the Akaoni dispose of me after all."

"....."

"You see, Azusa, it's you I wanted. I wanted you, the only person in the entire world who has the same circumstances as me. You are my only connection to the world; I have no other. I fully understand our connection is minuscule and weak. We were simply two people created in the same experiment. But I wanted to become family with you, even though we aren't blood related."

"Tsukiharu..."

"Hey, Azusa? I know what I did was wrong, but I don't regret it. How could I when it allowed me to talk with you like this right now? I wonder if people who didn't know us would think we look like siblings?" Tsukiharu smiled, looking truly happy.

Azusa felt like her heart was being crushed. He made her aware of just how good she had it. While they both came from the same circumstances of being created in a laboratory for some freak vampire experiment, Azusa had a father and a mother who raised her. She had a family who loved her.

But Tsukiharu had no one. No family to love him, no friends to laugh and cry with him, and no teacher to show him the way. Despite what little connection he had to Azusa—if it could even be called a connection—he grew attached and infatuated with her because of how deeply he wanted a connection with someone somewhere. He was lonely.

Azusa decided to stop thinking about it. She put down her lunch box and gently hugged Tsukiharu who sat beside her. She tightened her arms around his back as she breathed in the faint fragrance of his soap.

"Azusa?"

"Let's become family, Tsukiharu. If you are okay with me, I'll be your family."

Tsukiharu stiffened in her embrace. She gently stroked the back of his head to ease his tension.

"Pity?"

"It might be. But I currently think I wouldn't mind becoming your family."

"Are you an idiot? I did such awful things to you. You seriously lack caution."

"I get that a lot. What a flashy sibling fight we had."

"Stupid."

"I want you to properly apologize to Kouya and the others. I'm fine, because we're siblings."

"I don't mind apologizing to you for what I did, but I don't want

to apologize to that guy. I still don't think I did anything wrong to him."

"Too bad. Please do it for me. We're family, so listen to me."

"You're stupid."

"Aren't I?"

"Mm-hm," Tsukiharu nodded and whispered, "Thank you."

Azusa dropped her arms and let go of him.

"You can call me Big Sis Azusa now."

"You're the older one? You don't look too dependable though."

"What's wrong with me being older? I always wanted a little brother!"

They laughed together. Suddenly, tears spilled from Tsukiharu's eyes.

"How strange. I'm so happy and want to keep up appearances, and yet here I am crying..." He rubbed at his tears and smiled like he had gained something valuable. "I'm such a lucky guy to have friends and a sibling."

"Yeah."

"Then, as your sibling, this is the last time."

"What is?"

Tsukiharu seemed happy, but his eyes slowly narrowed. "The last time I'll invite you, Azusa. Leave this town with me. Let's take your father with us and escape. There's no need for you to become their guinea pig. If you're worried about being pursued, I will take care of everyone for you. So...won't you take my hand, Azusa?"

"Tsukiharu..." Azusa sadly shook her head and put a little distance between them. Staying in reach of him was her way of showing her trust.

"You see, I'm an idiot, so I've already gotten used to life here. I think it wouldn't be half-bad for things to stay this way. Of course, I'd be horrified if the day they want to vivisect me comes, and I plan to run away as fast as I can. But I believe Ichi, Subaru, and Kouya would never do such an awful thing to me."

"You really are an idiot..."

"I think so too. Also, we might find a way to save you if we stay here, right?"

"You don't have to worry about me."

"How can I not? My little brother is in serious trouble."

"Idiot."

"Hey! Calling me an idiot every chance you get is really mean! Besides, I'm Kouya's contractor. Won't it be bad if I suddenly disappear?" Azusa said with a smile.

Tsukiharu pat her on the head and smiled wryly, "Nothing but suffering awaits a little brother with an idiotic big sister."

“Give up on escaping with me.”

“All right.”

A little while later, the bell signaling the end of lunch break rang.

Chapter 57: Jealousy

TWO hours earlier.

“Whoa, Kou, you look like you just walked off the set of a gory horror movie. Was it a hard fight this time?” Subaru asked, spotting Kouya standing in front of the mansion with only the right side of his body drenched in blood.

“It was a cinch. I just got bathed in more blood than usual because the body stumbled toward me without its head. I don’t really care, but can you grab me a towel? I don’t mind going in like this, but blood isn’t easy to clean.”

“Sure,” Subaru casually responded and returned inside the mansion to snatch a towel from the linen closet. He came back outside and tossed it to Kouya. “At any rate, a lot of people have been falling to F rank lately. This is the third this week. There used to only be three a month before.”

“To be exact, I took out two today, making it four this week,” Kouya corrected.

“Two in one day? ...This is getting out of hand.”

“It was the Ichishimas. Both husband and wife fell to F rank at the same time.”

“The Ichishimas fell! How? More than thirty years have passed since they both awakened as vampires...”

“I don’t know why, but I won’t deny the strange feeling I got from them.”

“Strange feeling?”

“I don’t really know how to explain that either.”

Generally, people who fell to F rank were unstable vampires who had only recently awakened or those who failed to awaken as a vampire. Not that there were never cases of someone falling to F rank after becoming a vampire, but it was exceedingly rare. The chance of two people falling to Fs at the same time was extraordinarily low and unheard of. Neither Kouya nor Subaru had encountered such a thing in all their years of hunting Fs.

Kouya roughly scrubbed off the dripping blood and went straight into the mansion. Subaru sighed at his irate mood.

“Are you tired? I just heard today that Master Akashi had you strengthen security around town recently. Just how many familiars are you using at once now? You’re going to go over what you can handle.”

“I only stay connected to one at all times. The rest I have set to only connect to me if something happens. I have about thirty out altogether.”

“You have thirty familiars out 24/7? Are you insane?! Are you trying to kill yourself? Master Akashi has been working you to death since the day you contracted. You’re going to burn through your reserves in no time.”

“I agree,” Kouya said, ending the conversation by going into the shower. Subaru stared at his bloodied back with worry and sighed.

“**FEEL** refreshed now?”

“What’re you doing in my room?”

Subaru greeted Kouya from where he laid sprawled out on his couch. He chuckled, ignoring Kouya’s dubious glance as he dried his hair with a towel.

“Isn’t it almost time for Azusa to have lunch? I’m curious about what that Tsukiharu brat is like at school and thought you might let me spy on them with you.”

“Too much time on your hands?”

“I’m busier than most people. What? You want to help me?” Subaru jested as he cheerfully pulled out a mirror the size of a notebook and held it in front of Kouya.

Kouya sighed and took hold of the mirror. The mirror instantly changed from reflecting the room to revealing the school campus. The scenery quickly shifted to focus on the rooftop.

“Where is this? It’s up high. Is this on top of a tree?”

“Yeah. She always eats lunch on the rooftop.”

“Looks like your little brother isn’t there today. I only see that guy waiting for Azusa. I heard the three of them always eat lunch together. Did I hear wrong?”

“Today is... Oh yeah, if I’m not wrong, Youta’s coming of age ceremony is coming up soon. He probably went home early.”

“Then I doubt Azusa will eat on the rooftop. She would be stuck alone with Tsukiharu. Oh, she’s here.”

The mirror showed Azusa coming onto the rooftop from the door. She turned her head in search of Youta. And then, realizing he wasn’t there, she went straight back to the door—or not.

Subaru’s eyes widened with shock over seeing her sit beside Tsukiharu after only a few back-and-forth comments. “Hey, Kou! Can’t we listen in on them? Where’s the sound?”

“Can’t hear from this distance,” Kouya said in his usual manner, but his tone was blatantly deeper and stiff. Subaru felt the blood drain from his face as he felt the aura exuding from Kouya.

Scary! Scary! Scary! Scary! This guy is definitely furious! What the heck are you doing, Azusa? Subaru panicked internally.

“Kou, Azusa isn’t doing this to intentionally go against your wishes, so I hope you won’t get too angry at her when she gets home. Haha...”

“.....”

“Ah, yeah, I shouldn’t have said that,” Subaru apologized as cold sweat trickled down his back with just a single glare from Kouya.

Why is it me, and not the person getting in the way of their love, who has to take the blunt of his anger? Sorry, Azusa, you’ll just have to let him get angry at you today. Subaru internally apologized for offering Azusa up as a scapegoat and returned his attention to the mirror.

Azusa picked at her lunch while conversing normally with Tsukiharu. Subaru thought she seriously lacked any sense of danger, but he also found that was one of her good points. Her lack of caution was what allowed her to enter Kouya’s heart and become deeply rooted there. Because of that, he didn’t blame her for her behavior, but he also didn’t know what to do with the encroaching desire he had to flee from Kouya’s room.

Kouya looked as expressionless as usual, but seething anger exuded from him. A piece of the anger was directed toward Azusa, but the majority of it was meant for Tsukiharu chatting beside her.

“A man’s jealousy is unsightly, you know?”

“Shut up.”

“You acknowledge you’re jealous?”

“I thought I told you to shut up?” Kouya glared at Subaru, his eyes a darker red than usual. Subaru quickly looked away from his menacing scowl and back at the mirror. He flinched at what he saw.

Azusa was *hugging* Tsukiharu.

The image suddenly vanished just as Tsukiharu hesitantly wrapped his arms around her back. Why did it vanish? Because the mirror cracked into a hundred pieces, starting from the handle.

“K-Kou? Take a deep breath and calm down! Please!”

“I’m calm.”

“No. No, you aren’t. A calm person doesn’t shatter a mirror just by holding it! A calm person doesn’t give off an ominous aura!”

“I’m fine.” Kouya’s brow was furrowed deeper than the Mariana Trench. Looking far from okay, he slowly started getting ready to go somewhere.

“Where are you going?” Subaru quickly asked.

“I’m going to pick someone up.”

“...May I ask, just to be sure, who it is you are going to pick up?”

“Azusa.”

“I-I see. Have a safe trip.”

Why are you going to pick her up now? What about her afternoon classes? There were many questions Subaru had for Kouya,

but he saw him off without another word.

“What am I saying to a man who looks like he’s on death’s door?” Subaru muttered with a sigh.

Chapter 58: Misunderstanding

“**BY** the way, Azusa, how do you feel about the Akaoni?” Tsukiharuru asked on the rooftop after the bell rang. His gaze wasn’t stern, but it insinuated no lies would get past him.

“H-How do I feel about him in what sense?” Azusa asked flustered, her face bright-red.

“Do you like him?”

“He’s a great man, isn’t he? I like him! Obviously, I do!”

“I’m not asking if you like him as a person. I’m asking what you think of him as a man.”

“U-Um, well...” Azusa choked out and took a step back.

She still couldn’t determine whether her feelings for him were in the romantic sense or not. It was a fact she liked him, but she didn’t know if that was romantic affection or just platonic.

“Okay, then do you mind going to the classroom without me?” Tsukiharuru asked with an exasperated half-smile at her reaction.

“Why? We’re in the same class. What’s wrong with going back together?”

“I’ve got a real bad feeling right now, so I rather not. I planned on protecting you if you had no feelings for him, but seeing as you might, I’ll return to class alone.”

“You’ve lost me. What do you mean?”

“I don’t want to get dragged into this one. I believe it’s your fault on all sides of the matter this time.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ll get it eventually. Also, I’m taking the rest of the day off from school.”

“Why?”

“Go on. You will be late for class if you don’t hurry!” Tsukiharuru pushed Azusa until she was on the other side of the rooftop door. He firmly locked it behind her.

“**WHAT** was Tsukiharuru trying to say? I don’t get him,” Azusa said to herself as she walked through the courtyard to get to her next class. She could have taken the bridge across to the other building, but with little time left until her next class, she took a shortcut through the courtyard. With the majority of students already in their classrooms, she was the only person briskly walking across the empty courtyard.

Azusa only needed to turn the next corner and enter the school

building, when someone suddenly grabbed her arm. The yank on her arm was powerful enough for the momentum to make her stumble back in the same direction.

“Ow!” she squeaked as her nose impacted something sturdy.

“.....”

The sturdy thing appeared to be a chest. She cautiously looked up to see a familiar face glaring down at her with an air of immense irritation.

“K-Kouya, what are you doing here?”

“I came to get you.”

“I have afternoon classes today.”

“I know.”

“U-Um...are you angry about something?”

“Not really.”

“That’s a sign you are really angry, you know?”

Kouya grabbed hold of Azusa’s arm and briskly pulled her along with him. Realizing they were headed for the school gate, she quickly stopped him.

“H-Hang on a minute, Kouya! I told you I have afternoon class!”

“And I said I know you do.”

“Then why are we leaving?”

“...Can’t we leave?”

“Excuse me?”

What does he mean? Is it just my imagination that he wants me to return home with him? Azusa hesitantly tilted her head. *Is there a reason for him to want to take me home early?*

“Ah!” Azusa exclaimed like a light bulb lit over her head. “Do you need blood?”

“.....”

Or maybe not?

Kouya’s scowl only deepened at her question. He seemed to be contemplating something, but Azusa couldn’t pick up on what he was thinking.

“Am I wrong? Then—”

“Can I have some blood?”

“Pardon?”

“...I’ll have some.”

“Wait! K-Kouya?”

Kouya abruptly pulled Azusa into his arms. Embarrassed, she struggled to escape his embrace, but the more she struggled the more he tightened his grip.

“Don’t struggle.”

“But we are at school!”

“You just did the same thing earlier.”

“When?”

“Doing it with Tsukiharu is fine, but not with me?”

“Ah...um? Were you watching us, Kouya?”

“.....”

His silence confirmed it. He tightly embraced Azusa. She couldn't see his face, but he gave off an extremely unhappy aura. She gingerly wrapped her arms around his back—he jumped.

“Um, I'm sorry. You are mad because I let my guard down around Tsukiharu, right?”

“.....”

“I feel bad for you and the others about this, but you see, I don't view Tsukiharu as an enemy anymore... Um, I decided to become his family.”

Azusa heard Kouya's sharp intake of breath. His arms tightened on her back to the point it was getting painful.

“Screw that.”

“Eh?”

“I didn't hold myself back just so you could be taken away by that guy.”

“What—”

Kouya dropped his arms, freeing Azusa. Immediately after letting go, he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her toward him again. She endured the pain of his fingers digging into her shoulders. He gazed down at her with ruby eyes glowing a far darker red than ever before.

“Kouya, um, Tsukiha—”

“Shut up already.” Kouya's words weren't the only thing that cut Azusa off. Her body trembled as he pushed his lips against hers. It wasn't a gentle peck on the lips. He didn't go as far as a French kiss, but still roughly smothered her lips with his. Azusa pounded on his chest in resistance. Nevertheless, Kouya showed no signs of letting her go.



Just when she thought he finally freed her lips, a sharp pain pierced her neck, ripping a small painful moan from her.

“Ow...ah...”

“.....”

Kouya buried his face in her neck and slurped her blood. His throat purred with every gulp. The speed she felt the strength draining from her body informed her he was drinking way more than usual.

“Stupid Kouya,” Azusa said, making eye contact with a surprised Kouya before her consciousness faded.

Chapter 59: The Fallen

NOW *I've done it...*

Kouya felt a deep sense of self-hatred as he looked at an unconscious Azusa limp in his arms. No need to guess why she fainted—it was a sudden case of anemia. In short, he drank too much blood from her.

He had barely held onto his self-control until the point when Azusa declared Tsukiharu wasn't her enemy. He had a vague idea she didn't feel hostility toward him, and he was willing to let it pass because they had entered a truce with Tsukiharu. But he lost his cool at her family comment.

In his mind, a boy and girl of their age becoming family meant they were entering a relationship akin to marriage. They were going to be lovers or a relationship of that nature... It took less than a few seconds for his mind to reach that conclusion, and before he knew it, he had forcefully stolen Azusa's lips. And then he buried his face in her neck with animalistic passion to greedily devour her blood.

I haven't been holding myself back all this time to give her to that guy. I've been holding back to keep her from getting hurt by me.

I would have told her my feelings if I were a normal human man or even a normal vampire. If she accepted my feelings, I would have forever treasured her. But that's a scenario that can never come true. I'm neither a human man nor a normal vampire. I can't bring her happiness. I can only devote myself to watching over her to make sure she doesn't become unhappy.

As painful as it will be, I will permit her to fall in love with the man of her choosing. But why did it have to be him of all people? The animal passion that had taken over him earlier vividly came to mind. He pushed through it this time though.

I feel sorry for you being loved by a man like me. After what happened, I can't help thinking Tsukiharu is acting more with you in mind than I ever have. Only the worst kind of man forces himself on the girl he loves, making her pass out due to his own selfish desires. Another way to look at it is that she was correct in choosing Tsukiharu over me. Not that I was ever in the running for her heart in the first place...

Kouya sighed at his internal turmoil and carried Azusa. He couldn't leave her like this.

"I'm sorry," Kouya apologized to Azusa who couldn't answer him. He spun around to the familiar presence behind him.

"Oh my gosh, this is worse than I thought. What the heck are you doing? Seriously, man," Tsukiharu said, exasperation apparent in his voice and expression. He wasn't angry, but still frowned unhappily.

What a casual response after seeing another man make his woman faint. Maybe he's raging on the inside, Kouya thought and prepared himself for whatever Tsukiharu was going to say to him.

"The Nurse's Office is this way. You need to let her rest for now. You did this to her, so you better carry her carefully, Akaoni."

Kouya blinked in astonishment.

"**HUH?** So basically you misconstrued the whole situation, putting Azusa through this traumatic experience for nothing? You're the worst."

"....."

"I agree Azusa phrased it badly and that her actions can't be praiseworthy from your standpoint, but how could you drink so much blood you knocked her out? What's with you? Are you an idiot?"

"....."

"And let's face it, wouldn't she have said she started dating me rather than say we're family? Why couldn't you at least use your brain a little? Ew, seriously disgusted here. This is why I hate people who lose their cool faster than it takes to actually think things through."

"...I don't want to hear that from you of all people."

"Excuse me? Do you think you can get away with cocky comments? Maybe I should let Azusa know the person the Akaoni is rumored to have a yen for is actually her."

"....."

Tsukiharu sneered as he looked down on a speechless Kouya—a triumphant expression from every angle.

Tsukiharu brought Kouya all the way to the Nurse's Office door and then insisted he tell him what led to Azusa fainting. He wouldn't let him inside the Nurse's Office unless he told him and went as far as threatening to burn the whole building down. Kouya still refused and attempted to return home.

"What's this? Your self-centered pride won't even let you allow Azusa her well-deserved rest. You're the worst kind of person. Oh, and if you're ashamed to expose your feelings, don't be. It's a pointless worry—I know everything and picked up on the rest. On top of knowing all there is to know, I'll give you this word of advice one last time: think of the woman you love's safety above all else, Akaoni," Tsukiharu warned in a dark tone. Kouya had no choice but to reluctantly assent. It wouldn't hurt to let Azusa rest in a bed sooner rather than later.

Kouya greatly regretted his decision now.

"I thought you were more cool-headed than this, Akaoni, but it

looks like I was wrong. I wonder if you fall under that saying. You know, the one where they say love changes people? Yuck, someone's hit puberty."

"...Brat."

"And who is it that's madly in love with a woman the same age as this brat? Hm, geezer?"

"....."

Kouya had a feeling the day would never come that he could win in a war of words against Tsukiharu. It was great and all that he got Azusa into bed, but now he had to deal with a brat shooting sarcastic digs at him with a triumphant sneer.

As one would expect, Kouya didn't tell Tsukiharu about the kiss he forced on Azusa, but aside from that he tried to tell him everything as frankly as possible, to which Tsukiharu responded with exasperation and the truth behind what really happened between him and Azusa. In short, Kouya learned it was all a misunderstanding.

Kouya's thoughts were a chaotic mess of relief over it being a misunderstanding and a guilty conscience for stealing her lips and making her pass out for a mere misunderstanding. He heaved a loud sigh.

Forcing himself on the woman he loved over a misunderstanding brought about enough mental anguish on its own and yet when it came to Tsukiharu, he just had to dig the knife in deeper with his caustic comments, inflicting serious grief on Kouya.

"Well, setting that stuff aside, Akaoni, can you stop doing this kind of thing? For now, I want to act like a younger brother and follow my older sister's wishes. I'll quit trying to pry her away from you guys. But, just so you know, I'll do my own thing if you keep up this behavior. Should this continue, I plan on tying her up and forcefully dragging her away from you."

"Okay."

The only reason Tsukiharu, who Kouya held in great contempt, got an obedient response out of him was because he genuinely felt he was in the wrong this time. Tsukiharu considered taking a crack at him while he was down, but sighed instead. A hint of nervousness could be seen in his countenance.

"Sorry."

Tsukiharu apologized.

Kouya's eyes widened. Tsukiharu continued, a sense of desperation in his tone, "For nearly killing you. And just let me say, I don't mean any of this! Azusa told me to apologize, so I'm apologizing. I don't think I did anything wrong and I think I would do the same thing should the same scenario occur. But Azusa asked me to, so I'm apologizing for her sake! Sorry!"

“.....”

Kouya was too stunned for words. Tsukiharu looked away, his ears turning tomato-red. After a pause, Kouya regained his cool and slowly found the words he wanted to say, “Don’t apologize. If you do, I’ll be stuck having to apologize to you too. We were both at fault back then.”

“Apologize to me then. I have to apologize because Azusa told me to.”

“Sorry.”

“...! Do you not have any pride as a man?”

“Also, thanks for showing me the way here. The whole building is new compared to when I attended. I wouldn’t have been able to find it on my own.”

“Gah, don’t turn serious on me! This sucks! I have no intention of being friendly with you!”

“Same here.”

They both glared at each other, but the icy air there before was gone. If anything, they were both confused about how to cope with the friendlier mood between them.

Suddenly, Kouya’s head jerked up. “...Youta?”

“What? Something happen to Youta?” Tsukiharu understood what it meant when Kouya quickly raised his hand to cover his right eye and fell silent. He was connecting his consciousness over to one of his familiars.

If I’m not mistaken...his job in this town is... Tsukiharu stopped thinking and smacked a mirror positioned over a nearby sink.

“Hey, Akaoni! Show me too! What happened to Youta?” Tsukiharu shouted. Kouya touched the mirror at his insistence.

The mirror reflected Youta walking through the center of town. But it took a good hard look to tell. Why? Because his hair had grown long enough to drag across the ground behind him and his eyes were vacant. Drool dripped from the corner of his mouth and he walked unsteady on his feet.

Tsukiharu’s voice trembled at the sight, “...You...ta?”

Kouya’s expression twisted with anguish, “Youta has fallen to F rank.”

Chapter 60: Powerless

“YOUTA has fallen to F rank.”

Those were the first words Azusa heard when she regained consciousness. Unable to understand what it meant, she turned her head in the direction of the voice to see two familiar backs arguing about something. Chills ran down her spine at the shadowy figure reflected in the mirror the others were facing. She only needed a second to realize it was an F. Being attacked by an F in the forest left enough of an impression she could tell one just from the aura it gave off. The creature reflected in the mirror undoubtedly resembled the F in the forest.

The words she heard as she regained consciousness crossed her more awake brain. Who she was looking at finally set in.

“Youta?”

Kouya looked over his shoulder at the sound of her voice.

“Sorry!” Tsukiharu muttered and dashed out of the room.

Azusa slowly sat up and pointed to the image in the mirror. “Kouya...is that Youta?”

“Yeah. Youta just fell to F rank,” Kouya explained with a heartrending expression. Azusa could only gasp. She couldn’t find the words to say to him when his expression told her what he had to do now.

Azusa understood what role Kouya played in this vampire town. His job was to eradicate former kin who had fallen to F rank. It wasn’t hard to imagine the Fallen’s families despising and screaming at him for the job he had to do.

Regardless of how anyone felt, it was a job someone had to do. He had been disposing of Fs for decades. As such, even his younger brother wouldn’t be an exception to him.

“I’m going. Stay here.” His hand gently stroked her hair and yet his expression was stiff. She grabbed his arm.

Sensing his hand tremble ever so slightly in hers, she shouted at him on the verge of tears, “You can’t go! If you go, Kouya, you will have to—”

“That is my job. I can’t give special treatment to my relatives when I have cruelly slaughtered every single kin who has fallen to F rank.”

“But Youta is your younger brother!”

“...And that is why I must. How could I let someone else do it? Besides, Youta would have never wanted us to let him wander loose until he attacked someone.” His steadfast voice seemed as if he were trying to convince himself.

Azusa sensed his resolution was built on top of a thin layer of ice that could crack at any moment. One more push could get him to reconsider. She opened her mouth to say more, but was interrupted.

“So this is where you were, Kouya.”

“...Patriarch.”

A man with the same ebony-black hair as Kouya stood in the doorway to the Nurse's Office. Azusa had met him once before—he was Kouya's father, the man you would hear rumors about just by being in the Red Coven's town. The Red Coven Patriarch, Akashi Doumeki, walked up to Kouya.

“I received word of Youta's sudden change from the Kisaragi House just as I arrived at my younger brother's place. Have you picked up on the situation?”

His younger brother was the school headmaster. Apparently, he received word when he happened to drop by the school.

Kouya averted his eyes from Akashi and growled, “...Youta has fallen to F rank.”

“Is that so? ...In that case, you know what you must do, don't you? Kouya.”

“Yeah.”

“Kouya!” Azusa shouted, but Kouya would no longer listen to her.

He calmly broke down the situation for Akashi like it was an ordinary job. “The target is currently on course for the school. It will be too dangerous to take him on in town. I wish to borrow the school campus. Do I have your permission?”

“Very well. I grant you permission with my authority. Should we send the students home immediately?”

“No. Things will go south if they come across the target on the way home. Put out an official warning for no student to leave the school building. I will handle the rest.”

“I'll take care of it. I also sent for the Shiranui siblings to come just in case. They should be here soon.”

“...Okay.”

Changing the way he referred to Youta in his conversation with Akashi was a sign of Kouya's resolve and his inevitable heartache. It would be easier to view Youta as a target than as his little brother.

There was no room for Azusa to interrupt their conversation. She couldn't even get a word in as Kouya left the Nurse's Office.

“Azusa, go along with the rest of the students to hide in the school building. Kouya is on the case. Things should be handled immediately, but you mustn't come close to the battle because it will still be dangerous,” Akashi said with a gentle expression after Kouya left.

“Do you think nothing of what is going on, Mr. Akashi? Isn’t it your own sons who will kill and be killed?!” Azusa criticized him for looking like he didn’t care.

“...Do you honestly believe I think nothing of this? Even I am sad. But someone must do it. What other choice do we have? It is far better for Youta to be killed by the older brother he adored than to wander the land as a monster hurting others.”

“You might have a point, but still! Kouya doesn’t want to kill the younger brother who adored him so much! Not to mention, having Kouya kill another brother in front of a bunch of people again is only going to lead to him being treated worse than before! Can’t you do anything about this?!”

“If I could do something about it, I would have long ago,” Akashi said, his voice tinged with anger. Azusa shuddered. He continued with a composed expression, “Besides, even if I asked another person to do it, Kouya would never agree to it. He wants to be the one to put an end to the brother he got along with so well. I can tell. After all, I bore the responsibility of that role until the day he took it off my shoulders...”

“You did, Mr. Akashi?”

“I did. And I killed my wife who had fallen to F rank with these very hands.”

“...!” Azusa sucked in her breath at the absurd confession she got out of him.

Akashi smiled kindly. “It’s a thing of the past now. But you get the point, yes? This is not a matter an outsider such as you has any right to comment on. Obediently hide in the school building with the rest. I released a familiar earlier. There should be an announcement soon telling everyone to gather on the rooftop because of the coming danger. We can’t have students on the first and second stories get dragged into the possible destruction should a body crash into the building.”

As soon as Akashi finished speaking, an announcement on what he said came over the loud speaker. The announcement said nothing about why they had to evacuate to the rooftop.

“You can’t do anything. If you want something to resent, resent your own powerlessness,” a faint smile crossed Akashi’s lips at those final words.

Chapter 61: Partner

ALL the students across campus gathered on the rooftop in a tumult of noise. Some students were excited about the sudden upset to their normal routine, while others were apprehensive about what was about to happen. Among them, Azusa sat at the best spot to see the entire campus with her face buried in her knees over the tragic end that was to come. Kii stood beside her, concerned about her behavior. Yuu, who was always with Kii, went home early after her little fainting incident when she met Kouya before school.

“What’s wrong, Azusa? You look down,” Kii said looking across the campus from the rooftop. She sat beside Azusa.

A depressed Azusa showed no signs of responding or lifting her face even when others spoke to her. Kii sighed at her friend and scooted closer to her as she continued to talk even though she didn’t answer back.

“I wonder what’s going on today. Why did we have to evacuate to the rooftop? Do you know what’s up, Azusa?”

“.....”

“So you do know. Does it have something to do with your partner? Is something about to start?”

“.....”

“A.ZU.SA! Stop being depressed and say something.” Kii head-butted Azusa. She still didn’t react. Kii gave up and stretched, popping her back. She looked at the campus again and jumped.

“Ah! Hey, isn’t that Kouya?”

Azusa’s head snapped up and she dropped her gaze on the campus. The others had yet to notice Kouya hiding in the shadow of a large tree waiting for Youta. She sharply sucked in her breath.

“Did something happen with your partner?”

“Not exactly,” Azusa answered for the first time.

“I see,” Kii said. “Why are you here if you guys aren’t fighting?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Your partner is about to do something, right? Is it okay for you to stay here?”

“I can’t do anything even if I go. I’m a normal human, you know?”

“Did Kouya tell you that?”

“.....”

Azusa was at a loss for words. The fact was, he didn’t tell her that. Even if she went with him, she had neither the power to kill Youta in Kouya’s place nor the power to do something about Youta. Within the scope of human girls, she was confident she was stronger

than most, but it was a different matter altogether when it came to vampires. She couldn't even begin to compare herself to their innate strength.

She was powerless. Helplessly and hopelessly powerless.

"Then isn't it the same whether you're with us or not, Azusa?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, isn't that basically how it is? Logically speaking, staying here to talk to me and watching over things from the sidelines with us won't help you save anyone. Is it the same to you whether you were here or not?"

"That's—"

"That's not how it is, right? I know that." Azusa was physically older than Kii, but Kii slowly pat her on the head like she was comforting a younger sister. "You might not understand how things work here because you were raised in a human city, but a 'contractor' is like a 'partner' to us. Whether you develop a romantic relationship or not, you share your lot in life. Which is why you would never establish a contract with someone you don't get along with. And even if you did, it'd be a contract in name only."

"....."

"The truth is, should one side of the contract fall to F rank, the other side is responsible for removing them. But there are many people who become romantically involved, and even for those who don't, contract partners develop an emotional attachment to each other. There will always be those who can't kill their partner. The one who takes over for them is the Akaoni...Kouya.

"That's why I was honestly amazed when I first learned you were Kouya's contract partner. It's not like he wanted to take on the role, it's one we forced on him—and when I think you are bearing that burden by his side, I'm awestruck. It would be too heavy and painful for me to shoulder. I would surely be crushed by it."

"....."

"But, looking at you now, you simply didn't know what you were getting into, huh? You knew nothing of the weight and anguish that comes with becoming a vampire's contractor... If that's true, give up while you can. Even if you continue your contract with him, you better quit calling yourself his contractor. You can't stand by Kouya's side as you are, Azusa."

Azusa gasped, clenched her fists, and bit down on her lower lip. She was mortified. Mortified by her inability to counter what was said and by the way Kii's words were said out of consideration for her. Everything she said was true. As things stood, she could never stand beside him. She had to change—change from her powerless self.

"Do you think I can still make it in time?"

“...You can probably make it if you hurry,” Kii smiled wryly at the newly determined light in Azusa’s eyes when she lifted her face from her knees. She hadn’t intended to stir her up so much, but it appeared her words were more motivating than she imagined.

“Kii, thanks! I’m going to him!”

“Okay... Wait, whaat?! What’re you doing, Azusa?”

“I need to take the fastest route to him!” Azusa exclaimed, climbing over the fence separating the rooftop from the ledge. She safely climbed down the other side of the fence while listening to the teachers’ panicked voices behind her.

No way. She can’t be! No way she would do that! Thought everyone present.

But Azusa flashed her usual grin and shouted to Kouya hiding in shadows, “KOUYA! I’m coming! Please catch me!”

Azusa’s eyes locked onto Kouya’s outrageously surprised face. She dove off the rooftop ledge.

“**ARE** you an idiot?!” Kouya roared.

It had been a while since he last got angry at her. Actually, maybe it hadn’t been that long at all. But it was the first time he had ever gotten angry with a desperate expression on his face, which got Azusa giggling in his arms.

“I’m sorry.”

“Your face and words don’t match! Why would you do something like this in front of so many people? Didn’t I tell you not to expose your relationship with me? What are you going to do tomorrow? They’re going to give you the cold shoulder, y’know?”

Azusa grinned at Kouya’s angry yet concerned gaze.

“You probably don’t have to worry about that! Everyone will come to understand you, Kouya! Besides, I don’t mind if they do end up giving me the cold shoulder. If I can only choose between you and everyone else, I choose you. I’m your partner after all!”

“...I don’t want to ask that much of you,” Kouya said with a pained look, letting Azusa feel like she connected deeper with than ever before.

“This is something I want to do. That’s it. I’m sorry for acting arbitrarily. Also, I know it is a bit late for this, but can I stay with you today?”

“There’s nothing fun about what I have to do. Besides, you’ll only get hurt by watching.”

“I know. Also, I want you to do me a favor and capture Youta instead of kill him. Can you do that? I don’t want you to kill Youta,

Kouya.”

“Close your eyes then.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to witness you do it—I don’t want you to do it period! Let’s capture Youta without killing him. There may be a way to save him. Once we know for sure there is no other way, we can reconsider our options.”

“I’m repeating myself, but I can’t give special treatment to family —”

“Good idea. Let’s capture your little brother,” Subaru chimed in. Ichi stood beside him holding her katana.

“Sorry for interrupting the nice mood between you. We came flying when we heard from Master Akashi. Are we in the way?”

Kouya and Azusa finally realized they were conversing in each other’s arms the entire time and quickly separated.

Subaru smiled at them and brought the conversation back on topic, “I overheard a bit of what you two were saying and I think I’m on the capture the little brother bandwagon.”

“But—”

“I understand what you want to say too, Kou. Still, do you want all the kids watching from the rooftop to see the tragic scene of you killing your brother? That’s one plan I can’t support.”

“I can imagine the deep trauma it will cause,” Ichi added, backing up Subaru. Kouya frowned.

“How do you plan on capturing him then? You all know that Youta is the Patriarch’s son and has the famous Kisaragi bloodline flowing through him. He’s definitely going to be formidable. Letting him run around too long increases the chances of students getting hurt. Killing him is the best option to keep anyone else from getting hurt.”

“Isn’t that only if you took him on alone? Should it not be more than possible for the three of us to capture him if we take him on together? Do you plan on making me not use my partner which I brought here for this purpose?” Ichi asked, holding up her katana.

“Kou, you heard her. Let’s attempt to capture your brother first. We can kill him later if necessary. I doubt there is anyone the three of us can’t capture. Well, just in case, Azusa, can you give Kou some blood?” Subaru asked with a grin.

Azusa froze.

Blood... I’m pretty sure he drank my blood today. And if I’m not mistaken, something happened before that... The events she had forgotten from the afternoon returned to her. For some reason I don’t understand, Kouya came to school angry and said he wanted my blood... And then his face came close to mine...!

Remembering the soft touch of his lips instantly turned Azusa as

red as a lobster. Kouya put his hand to his head. Their behavior perplexed Subaru.

“What? Did I ask something I shouldn’t have?”

“...No, don’t worry about it. Anyway, I already got blood from her, so I’m good. Don’t touch on the topic again. I’m begging you,” Kouya pleaded.

Subaru swore he would do whatever it would take to get what happened out of Kouya later.

Chapter 62: Roaring Growl

A young man walked through the residential area with vacant eyes. All who laid eyes upon him shivered in fear and quickly rushed inside their homes. They patiently waited for him to move to the next area, hoping it wouldn't be their house he chose to stop at. His long hair rendered his face indistinguishable, but the way he dragged his legs and the abnormal hunch to his back gave away his aberrant state.

"He isn't there just yet," observed a silver-haired man watching from a nearby rooftop. His lips curled into a sick smirk; he seemed to be greatly enjoying himself. Another young man soundlessly approached him from behind.

"Shiro, were you the one who made Youta fall to F rank?" asked a voice deep enough to have come from the depths of *Sheol* and with enough heat to burn its listener's ears. Shiro turned with a smile to face his guest. He courteously bowed his head.

"Master Tsukiharu, it has been a while since you last graced me with your presence. How many weeks has it been since we last met? You have my utmost apologies for not showing myself until now."

"I didn't ask you about that. Answer me. Was it you?"

"What has angered you so?" Shiro asked with indifference. Tsukiharu grabbed his shirt collar and slammed him into the concrete rooftop. He moved swiftly, leaving Shiro no opening to escape from being pinned to the ground.

"You cause people to fall! Did you think I've forgotten?!"

The F rank vampire who attacked Azusa crossed Tsukiharu's mind. The course of events leading up to Azusa's abduction was enacted by Shiro alone. He remembered watching everything get taken care of without really understanding what was going on.

"You made Youta drink the same drug you forced on that man. And now you are using your special bugs to control him. Am I wrong?"

"There is nothing left for me to explain when you already know so much. Perhaps his recent fall to F is what has kept some portion of his reasoning intact enough to keep him from indiscriminately attacking people. You need not concern yourself with him, as I will control him before he does attack." Shiro turned his eerie eyes on Tsukiharu.

Rage and the creepiness of his eyes had Tsukiharu increase the strength he held him against the ground with. The concrete beneath Shiro cracked loudly. His face twisted with pain, but his lack of resistance furthered Tsukiharu's ire.

"Return Youta to normal! I know you can do it!"

“Unfortunately, Master Tsukiharu, I cannot. You can dissolve milk into coffee, but you cannot remove only the milk from the coffee once it has blended in, yes? The same concept applies here.”

“Don’t lie to me!” Tsukiharu’s fist swung down. A loud crack you wouldn’t expect to hear from punching someone rang across the rooftops as Shiro’s shoulder sunk into the concrete. His face warped with the agonizing pain as he bit his lower lip to endure from shouting out.

“Then tell me what you made him drink!”

“Nothing will come from possessing that knowledge.”

“You don’t get to decide that for me! I make my own decisions! I’ll kill you here and now if you don’t tell me.” Tsukiharu intensified his grip on Shiro’s neck, squeezing the saliva out of his mouth. He lessened the pressure, seeing Shiro struggling to breathe. “You can’t beat me. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes...I guess I do.”

“Tell me.”

“...Blood.”

“Blood?”

“Miss Azusa Saito’s blood. I had him drink her blood.”

“...!” Tsukiharu gasped, his eyes wide in shock. Shiro gazed up at his face with amusement. “Where did you get her blood?”

“...That is a secret.”

“Do you want me to kill you?!”

“You underestimate me too much, Master Tsukiharu.” Shiro smacked the concrete floor with a composed smile.

Tsukiharu quickly dodged the flash of light rising from the ground. A wave of light spread out around where Shiro stood. The ring of light reached as far as fifteen feet in diameter. A faint smile crossed Shiro’s lips in the center of the ring of light and he stomped on the ring one more time. A legion of butterflies spilled out of the ring of light. The butterflies flocked Tsukiharu, shedding their sleep-inducing scales all over him as if their lives counted on it.

“The most difficult aspect to this skill is that I must buy time until the spell is ready. Due to that, I had to inform you of things better left unsaid, but I am glad to see everything worked as planned... Sweet dreams, Master Tsukiharu.”

“Damn it!”

Tsukiharu could have easily dodged the attack if he hadn’t let down his guard, but on top of being distracted by Youta, he failed to keep an eye on his surroundings. He burned and liquefied thousands of butterflies, but for every hundred he killed, another thousand seemed to attack him in their place. Eventually, the legion of butterflies forced him on his knees. His body stumbled forward and he

collapsed on the rooftop with all his limbs spread out.

“I was ordered not to kill you, you see? So I shall not kill you yet. However, you inflicted some pain on me earlier, so please allow me to repay you for that much.” Shiro smiled icily and kicked Tsukiharu in the abdomen.

“**HE’S** here. You ready?” Subaru asked looking to his left and right in the middle of the schoolyard. Ichi and Kouya silently nodded. Azusa, who posed a high chance of working negatively in their favor during the battle, watched them from where she hid in a corner of the schoolyard.

“Let’s go over this one last time. We’re forbidden from killing him unless it’s unavoidable. We’re to try our best to keep his limbs attached. Cut the Achilles tendon in both legs and secure him with silver wire once his movement slows. I borrowed the wire we’ll be using from the school.”

The school was a place of learning, but it doubled as a shelter. As such, the school was equipped with various items in preparation for whatever disasters a vampire town may face. One of those items was a silver-wire woven rope created with the purpose of tying up suspicious people. For a vampire town, the most common suspicious person was other vampires. A normal rope couldn’t hold a vampire, bringing about the creation of the silver-wire rope.

The students gathered at the rooftop fence to watch what was taking place below. Their chatter instantly grew louder. Even screams could be heard. Their attention focused on the aberrant young man at the school gate. Everyone sucked in their breath—including Kouya.

“...Youta,” Azusa whispered, a lump in her throat.

His uncharacteristically long hair rendered his face indistinguishable to Azusa from where she stood in the schoolyard. The students watching from the rooftop had no idea it was Youta—a blessing, in a sense.

Youta’s head lifted with a jerk. It turned left to right as if in search of something and stopped upon spotting Kouya and the others. They took that as a sign to spread out. Ichi swiftly moved to sever the right Achilles tendon with her katana, and Kouya nimbly severed the left tendon with his bare hand. It happened faster than Azusa could blink.

Subaru wrapped the silver-wire around Youta once he fell to his knees. He firmly secured the rope around his legs and arms until it was confirmed he couldn’t move then proceeded to tie him up. Youta groaned painfully from beginning to end, but was helplessly subdued

by them. Everything finished in less than thirty seconds.

"Phew, good, no casualties," Subaru sighed with relief. Azusa stepped out of the brush at the sound of his voice. She looked to Subaru, silently asking if it was okay for her to come out, to which he nodded with a strained smile. With his permission, she approached Youta. The four of them surrounded him.

"Youta," Azusa said with heartbreak as she watched him painfully struggle against the rope, drool dribbling down his chin. Kouya looked at him the same way before averting his eyes as if he couldn't bear to watch anymore.

"It's great and all that capturing him went smoother than we expected, but what do we do now? Should I take him back home with me? I'm sure you don't want to see your little brother like this more than you have to, Kou."

"...Please take care of it," Kouya answered.

"Mmkay. Well, we can think of what to do with him from here and if we can't do anything to help him, I'll take him out." Everyone looked at Subaru after his ridiculous announcement. He gave a nonchalant nod. "It's not like Kou has to be the one to kill them. It's just that power and strength-wise, Kou would have the easiest time of it. As long as the F is taken care of, the person who deals the killing blow doesn't matter. Meaning, I can be the one to do it."

"I understand what you want to say and that you're thinking of me, but I—"

"I get you want to be the one to finish things with your younger brother, Kou. But, you know, it's hard for me to watch you mope around about this. So this only applies to the worst-case scenario, okay?" Subaru pat Kouya on the shoulder to get his consent, but he only scowled in return.

"Okay, let's decide on this after we get home then. I'll return home with him first. I doubt he'll be able to escape after I put him tied up in a silver cage, but I don't want you getting close to him, Azusa."

"Do we have a cage at the mansion?"

"We do."

Azusa had lived in the mansion for months and never saw anything like that, but she had no reason to doubt them. She didn't ask why they had one. Why? Because the mansion was prepared to keep her from escaping. She knew the answer without asking.

"Okay," Subaru said taking a breath and reaching out his hands to pick up Youta. And then he froze. "You've gotta be kidding me. What the hell?"

The other three turned their attention to Youta just in time to jump out of the way. Kouya picked up Azusa and put distance between them and Youta.

Youta growled wildly as he tore at the silver-wire rope wrapped around his body. Such resistance would normally end as a futile effort, but he was on the brink of ripping it completely off.

Just as everyone jumped back, a violent torrent of power erupted from Youta and the rope ripped off him. His power erupted with a wild roaring growl.

Chapter 63: Commence Strategy

SCREAMS erupted from the spectators at the sudden magic explosion. Torrential winds swept across the entire school. Several whirlwinds appeared without ceasing their violent tempest. The sheer wind pressure forced Azusa's eyes shut. Less than a second later, her vision was filled with Youta's wide-open mouth ready to take a bite out of her. Something smashed into Youta's face and sent him flying before she could scream. Naturally, Kouya punched him and wrapped his arm around Azusa's shoulder to protect her. Subaru narrowed his eyes beside them and assessed the situation.

"Is he after Azusa? It's hard to believe an F would target a specific person, which increases the probability of someone pulling the strings after all. I guess the most believable thing is that someone took control of him after he happened to fall to F rank."

"You could also say he narrowed down his target to the easiest prey, but it is not like he did not see Kouya with her, so your assumption seems the most likely."

"Pretty high chance that Shiro guy is pulling the strings again... In other words, it looks like we have to think Tsukiharuru betrayed us."

"He did no—"

"Not likely," Kouya cut off Azusa before she could argue with Subaru's theory. Everyone looked at him in surprise. "I was with him when he learned of Youta's fall. He lost his cool after finding out and pressed me for an answer on if there's anything we can do for him. He didn't look like he was acting. The man called Shiro might be involved, but he's most likely going about it independently."

"What? You were with him until now?"

"Yeah. He was pretty shaken up. He started shouting stuff about Shiro too, so I'd say he arrived at the same conclusion we did. On another note, he left to find Shiro."

"Whoa. Are you seriously protecting him? What on Earth brought this on?"

"I'm not protecting him. I'm merely stating the facts," Kouya answered with a conflicted frown. He wasn't intentionally protecting Tsukiharuru, but his comment sounded like it.

"Tsukiharuru said he hasn't seen Shiro lately! Plus, he gets along great with Youta. They're good friends! He wouldn't do this to Youta!" Azusa chimed in, taking advantage of Kouya's prior defense of Tsukiharuru.

"Uh...why does it feel like I'm the bad guy here? We can save that topic for later. Tsukiharuru aside, I want to believe in you two." Subaru turned his eyes from Kouya and Azusa to the fallen Youta. He

groaned, a hint of panic in his voice, "But first we have to do something about this kid..."

Youta stumbled to his feet and roared.

YOUTA was powerful. On top of his elite lineage, the fall to F rank removed any sense of reason from him, creating a monster that attacked at full power with no self-regard. Furthermore, whether it was due to Shiro controlling him or not, he didn't know how to stop the tumult of usually restrained power erupting from his core.

The whirlwinds ripping across campus hoisted all sorts of objects from the ground and easily uprooted trees. Every object caught by the whirlwind turned to powder as if it had been dumped in a blender.

"Is this a scene from *Twister*?!"

"This is not the time for bad jokes..." Ichi retorted in response to Subaru.

Whirlwinds twisted toward them in succession. Azusa escaped by being partially held by Kouya.

They wouldn't have been having such a hard time if they intended to kill him. But no one brought it up. Kouya didn't want to kill him and the others didn't want to have Kouya kill him nor did they want to kill him either. Kouya would surely suffer if he had to kill Youta with his own hands. His anguish wouldn't lessen if someone killed him in his place. He wouldn't have to be tormented by the feeling of his brother's blood on his hands if they did, but Youta's deformed figure being murdered by someone other than him would forever haunt Kouya.

The only way to kill Youta without traumatizing Kouya was to do it somewhere he wouldn't have to watch, as Subaru originally suggested. They were in no situation to do that now though.

To make matters worse, should Kouya kill Youta there and then, he would be instilling fear in every child watching from the rooftop. What was nothing more than an urban legend would be replaced with genuine dread. He would be adding new and undeniable fodder to the contempt and gossip spread behind his back.

Everyone aside from Kouya was concerned about that, making it impossible for them to come to a decision. He was the one who decided in the end.

"Subaru, back me up. I'm going to kill Youta."

"Kouya!" Azusa shouted.

Subaru snapped at him, "Are you insane? I'll do it then! I told you, you don't have to do this!"

"I'm fine. Ichi, can you take care of Azusa for me?"

"I can, but are you certain about this? He is your younger brother."

"I've made up my mind." Kouya took advantage of a temporary break in the wind to put Azusa down. He tried to hand her over to Ichi, but she clung to his arms like a disobedient child and wouldn't let go. "Hey!"

"You mustn't! Under any situation! You mustn't kill Youta, Kouya! If you insist on going, I'm coming with you!" Azusa declared just as a whirlwind cut between them and Ichi. Everyone dodged in time not to get hurt, but Kouya was stuck sighing at Azusa who still hadn't released his arm.

He pulled her into his arms and spoke as he dodged Youta's attacks coming from every direction, "Shut your eyes and cover your ears."

"I will not! Please don't kill Youta!"

"Don't ask for something I can't do."

"You don't want to kill him either, right?"

"Of course I don't want to!" Kouya snapped. Azusa's determined gaze didn't waver despite his anger.

"Then let's find a way to capture him."

"It's impossible. I could do something if he was a little weaker, but trying to capture someone in his state will get us hurt instead."

"Weaker... Will Youta's power weaken if we free him from Shiro's control?"

"Most likely, yeah... But we can't do anything about it when we don't know how Shiro is controlling him."

"...Fleas."

"Huh?"

"The first time I ran into Shiro he said he controlled the wild animals with fleas. He could be doing the same thing to Youta! We might be able to free Youta from him if we remove the fleas somehow."

"How—" Kouya stopped midsentence to look up. Azusa followed suit and looked up too.

She shouted at the person who alighted from the sky, "Tsukiharu!"

"What a relief. It looks like you guys haven't killed him yet. Don't kill Youta. Got it, Akaoni?"

"....." Kouya gave Tsukiharu a dirty look. It was almost as if his eyes were saying, "Then what do you want to do about him?"

Tsukiharu snorted. "Shiro is skilled at controlling people with bugs. So Youta should be released from his control if we kill the bugs. The only problem is that I never heard what kind of bugs he uses."

"Isn't it fleas? I just mentioned that to Kouya. Shiro used fleas to

control wild animals, so he might be using them on Youta too!" Azusa pointed out. Tsukiharu nodded.

"A flea may have latched onto some part of his body to control him. Okay, I'll superficially burn Youta's body to kill any fleas. Once he weakens, inflict heavy damage on him without killing him. And then you can capture him," Tsukiharu proposed as he nimbly sidestepped one of the whirlwinds Youta sent at him.

"Can you do that?"

"Who do you think you're talking to? Don't tell me you doubt the Ancient's power now of all times?" Tsukiharu clapped his hands. He pulled his hands apart, creating a countless number of fireballs—every one of them burning with a bluish-white flame. "I wonder if this would be too hot."

In a blink of an eye, the bluish-white flames simmered down to a bright-red. He changed the temperature of his flames.

"How about you, Akaoni? Can you get near Youta without being detected with Azusa in your arms? Why don't you entrust her with that Ichi woman?"

"I would love to do that, but..."

"....."

"Fine, I get it. Azusa can do what she wants. Well, with Azusa around you won't get any ideas about killing Youta," Tsukiharu shrugged off Azusa's glare. "We've got our strategy. All that's left is to execute it, but we don't want any casualties, so could you tell the other two dancing around whirlwinds over there to protect the students? They won't listen if I asked them."

He pointed to Subaru and Ichi. They watched them from a distance as they evaded the whirlwinds.

"No need to worry about them. They'll take the best course of action based on our movement."

"You trust them, eh?"

"They're smarter than me after all."

"Glad to hear it, but—whoa!" Tsukiharu staggered out of the way of one of the incessant whirlwind attacks and clapped his hands again, increasing the number of fire orbs. The orbs of fire encircled him like a living creature, seemingly waiting for their next command. "I'm not trying to make an opening for you, so you better find one on your own. You won't come out of this alive if you screw up!"

"...And who do you think you're talking to?" Kouya and Tsukiharu exchanged sharp looks, but their glares lacked its prior murderous intent.

Kouya kicked off the ground just as Tsukiharu released his wall of fireballs.

Chapter 64: Awakening

THE fireballs zipped around the lumbering twisters trying to stop them on their path for Youta. Once the flames made contact with his body, they wrapped around him from head to toe, burning only his downy hairs. The flames didn't burn his skin, but the close proximity of the flames gave off an irregular heat. Youta rolled on the ground to get the flames off.

Youta's concentration switched to getting rid of the flames, forcing him to lose control of the whirlwinds. Ichi and Subaru took out the set of twisters heading straight for the students, while Kouya circled around to Youta's blind spot with Azusa.

A shriek of rage ripped from Youta's throat, dispersing the flames enshrouding him. In that moment, the flow of power erupting from him stopped, and silence fell. He staggered to his feet and turned vacant eyes on his surroundings. He let out a low, beastly growl when his unfocused eyes stopped on Tsukiharu.

"Sorry, Youta," someone said as both of Youta's arms were chopped off and a large hole opened in his stomach. He collapsed to the ground with a sound similar to dropping a water balloon from a rooftop. Kouya stood behind him with Azusa in his arms.

"Akaoni! You'd better hope you didn't kill him! You've got to be out of your mind to chop off his arms without hesitation!" Tsukiharu shouted, being the first to run over to them, followed by Subaru and Ichi.

"We can reattach his arms. Things will get messy if he goes on another rampage here."

"You can chop off your little brother's arms because they might make things 'messy'?! This is why you are rumored to be cruel, relentless, and coldhearted!"

"Shut up."

"Now, now, you two, don't fight," Subaru interjected once he got there. Youta had lost consciousness on the ground beside the arguing Tsukiharu and Kouya. Regardless of the methods used, the strategy seemed to have succeeded. Relieved, Azusa stepped out of Kouya's embrace and took a deep breath.

"Your attack was not within the bounds of 'not killing him'! You totally took it to the brink of nearly killing him! You went too far!"

"I doubt he'd die with this. I'm not you. The hole you opened in my stomach before was a hundred times bigger than what I did to him."

"What I did was fine, because I did it with the hopes of killing you! Don't make yourself the standard! Youta is way more delicate

than you are! What were you going to do if he died?!”

“Hey, you guys, we don’t have the time to be arguing. Let’s get out of here,” Subaru urged.

“Shut your trap, weakling! I’m talking to the Akaoni right now!”

“W-Weakling? Now you’ve gone and said it...”

“A weakling is a weakling—gah!” Tsukiharu went flying sideways. The momentum sent him a good thirty-five feet until his body banged against the ground.

Everyone frantically looked in his direction to see one of Youta’s severed arms choking Tsukiharu. He struggled to pry the hand squeezing his windpipe off, but Youta’s arm was powerful enough to render any resistance futile.

They looked over at Youta to see if he was up, but he was still unconscious. Apparently, his body was acting in self-defense of its unconscious host. The other severed arm squirmed to life too.

“You...ta...” Tsukiharu painfully choked out.

He grabbed the arm and tried to rip it off his neck with force, but seemed to be hesitating because of all blood coming from the area his fingers dug into. Were he to use his true strength, he could have easily ripped the arm from his neck. He kept from doing so out of fear of harming Youta’s arm.

The other severed arm slowly rose into the air. Kouya darkly eyed the arm surrounded by wind, protectively floating in front of Youta’s body.

Aah, we were too late, Kouya sighed heavily.

A vampire in a normal state was incapable of moving an arm once it was severed. Normally, their brain and blood controlled every part of their tenacious body. With his body moving of its own accord, his brain and blood had lost control to sheer instinct.

In other words, the act of his arms moving separately from the main body signified his brain and blood had either died or had grown too weak to win control over his vampiric instincts.

“Youta,” Kouya quietly called his younger brother’s name. Of course, he didn’t answer him, which was unbearably painful.

Kouya lifted his arm to deal the death blow. Subaru seemed to be shouting behind him, but he wasn’t listening. He moved only on the impulse that said he must kill him.

My gentle little brother never wanted to transform into this monster. He doesn’t want to hurt others, Kouya convinced himself.

“Kou...ya...”

Kouya’s head jerked in the direction of the quiet voice to find Youta lifting his head to look at him. He lowered his arm upon seeing him looking up at him with tear-filled eyes. Youta weakly shook his head.

“...Kill...me...” Once he got those words out, he howled like a beast again. It lasted but a few seconds. He regained enough control for those few seconds. But it was more than enough to solidify Kouya’s resolve. He pulled his fist back without hesitation and released it to crush in Youta’s head.

“Kouya! Don’t!”

Kouya gasped at the figure that had slipped in between his fist and Youta. Azusa jumped in front of Youta with her arms spread out to protect him. Kouya stopped his fist an inch from impacting her face.

“You can’t do this, Kouya! You can’t kill You—” Before Azusa could finish talking, Youta attacked her from behind. She coughed up blood. Kouya’s eyes slowly trailed down to her chest where Youta’s hand stuck out.

“AZUSA!”

Azusa lost consciousness as she fell into Kouya’s arms.

“Azusa! Azusa!” Kouya screamed and shook her body. The arm ripped itself from her heart, returning to protect Youta and threaten Kouya not to come any closer. It wriggled in the air.

“Kou! Don’t shake her! We need to stop the bleeding first!”

Kouya smacked away Subaru’s hand and pinched Azusa’s cheek.

“Azusa! Wake up!”

“Kou! Let’s withdraw for now! At this rate, we won’t even be able to save anyone. Ichi just left to get the headmaster. That old bat’s only merit is his healing magic. Azusa will be fine. You need to calm down first.”

“Subaru...”

“What a scary face you’re making.”

Pressed to do something by Subaru’s insistence, Kouya stood up with Azusa in his arms. The blood drained from her face and her gushing blood spilled everywhere with nothing to stop it.

Youta was still growling, but remained unmoving as the two arms hovered protectively around his body. Released from the other arm’s stranglehold, Tsukiharuru gasped at what he saw. He whispered Azusa’s name and bit down on his lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

Just then, a conspicuously loud sound came from Azusa’s heart.

Everyone present heard the sound of her heartbeat and turned their attention to her. Even the students on the rooftop heard and pressed close to the fence to stare down at her.

“Azusa?” The sound got Kouya to look down at Azusa in his arms, but her pallid complexion looked no better than before. However, something undeniably changed. A section of her hair had turned completely white. Such a pure white, you would think

someone soaked her hair in white paint.

The loud heartbeat reverberated across the land again.



The sound wasn't heard with the ears; rather it seemed to echo directly inside everyone's head. The blood gushing from the hole in her chest stopped and the hole resealed itself at an unbelievable speed.

"Azusa," Kouya called out to her. Her eyes slowly opened and locked onto Kouya's face. However, her eyes were not the color he knew them to be.

"White..." Kouya muttered.

"Haha!" Azusa laughed in his arms like she just spotted an entertaining new toy. She wrapped her arms around his neck and easily pulled herself upright until she stood on her own legs. The rest of her hair instantly turned white.

"Good work," Azusa spoke in her own voice, but the way she spoke lacked her usual personality.

"Who are you?" Subaru asked on the spur of the moment from where he stood beside Kouya. She flashed a relaxed smile at him.

"I'm Azusa, aren't I? Azusa Saito. I'm nothing less nor anything more than her."

"You're a different person from the Azusa I know. Who are you? You're not going to say the Ancient has come back to life, are you?"

Azusa smiled without affirming or denying his question. She walked over to Youta on unsteady feet.

"Don't go near him!"

"Silence."

Kouya tried to stop her, but her one word rendered him incapable of moving. He struggled as much as he could, but it was as if his feet had been bound to the ground.

"You're as strong as I suspected."

"Azusa!"

"Protect the vessel so I never have to come out again," Azusa said and nimbly turned away from Kouya to stand in front of Youta. Youta couldn't move either. He gazed up at her and growled. "Mingling with humans has brought great pain upon you."

Azusa plucked the two arms from the air and reattached them to Youta's body. With the pale light she emitted, tendons jutted out of the arms and they returned to normal.

Even after regaining his former body, Youta continued growling at Azusa without attempting to attack her. She scooped up some of the blood still wetting her chest and dripped it into his mouth as he howled at her. She watched him purr as he drank it and closed her eyes as she put her hand to her chest.

"Desire to remain in the form you wish to be..." Her words took control of Youta like a spell.

He suddenly started clawing at his throat. Everyone was shaken

by his reaction—he acted as if he had been forced to drink poison. No one felt the urge to stop her though. She gave off the presence of an absolute ruler to everyone present.

Youta clawed at his throat, shrieked in agony, writhed with the utmost pain, and finally flopped onto the ground where he lay motionless with all four limbs spread out.

All present thought he had died. They believed he died from the poison she made him drink.

“Hurry and give him medical treatment. It appears he chose to remain a person.”

With that command from Azusa, Subaru quickly ran over to check on Youta—he was breathing. His eyes were firmly shut, but he appeared to be sleeping rather than unconscious, shocking Subaru.

Azusa sauntered over to Kouya and wrapped her arms around his neck. She smiled at him as he looked at her with a conflicted, worried, and mixed emotion expression.

“I’m a bit tired. I’ll sleep now.”

“Azusa?”

“I’ll definitely wake up, so don’t give me that face. I ask for your continued protection of the vessel.”

Her hair returned to its original flaxen color just as her eyes slowly closed. Kouya held up her suddenly heavy body and heard her deep breaths.

Chapter 65: The Truth Hidden Within Slumber

Azusa's POV

I was dreaming about the past. A dream of the time my mother passed away when I was a little girl.

I tottered through a large park in search of someone. I wasn't tall enough to look across the entire park, so I walked around the medium-sized park searching.

I sluggishly trudged ahead, my feet unable to stop as some confusing sense of purpose to apologize kept me going. Before long, I spotted the person I was looking for and quietly approached them. The young man, whose hair couldn't be called short because it grew just long enough to be tied behind his head, sat on a park bench with his head down in deep thought.

"Mister." His head jerked up at the sound of my voice. His eyes widened. "I'm sorry for breaking my promise with you, Mister. I came here today to tell you that."

I made him promise to make a flower crown together for Mommy's birthday, but I'm the one who didn't show up. Is he angry? I worried and gingerly looked up to get an idea of how angry he might be only to be greeted with his gentle eyes.

"Are you okay?"

Those words informed me he knew of my circumstances, so I thoughtfully considered the best way to answer him.

I shouldn't continue making adults pity me for this any more than they already do. I don't want to be thought of as a poor little girl. Most of all, the last thing I can do for my dead Mommy is show how well I'm doing, I thought.

"You know everything, don't you, Mister? ...Mommy turned into a star watching over me from the skies, so I have to happily live her share too!"

"Is that so?" he muttered and gently patted me on the head with his big hand. "I cried when my mother died...I think. I let my feelings take control and took it out on my surroundings. You're amazing for keeping it in."

"Yeah."

I felt more attached to him after hearing his mommy died too. How did he overcome the overwhelming pain gnawing at the hole formed in my heart? How did he endure the overflowing emotions

that surged with every flashback?

How can I endure it?

"But is there really any point in being amazing at a time like this?"

"Mm-hm."

"You can cry, you know?"

"Mm-hm."

He told me I can cry. But all the adults around me had praised me for not crying. Torn about what I should do, my young eyes easily filled with tears at his words.

"I can't. I feel like if I cry, I'll really never see Mommy again."

Not only did he open the floodgate to my tears, but he also opened the door to the feelings I had buried in the depths of my childish mind.

I understood I would never see Mommy again when I watched the smoke billow from the incense burned at her funeral. I was sure I did. But a piece of me wondered if it had just been a nightmare, and if the moment I cried would be the moment I acknowledged her death was real, so I didn't want to cry.

His large hand stroked the top of my head again. His conflicted yet gentle expression broke the dam stopping me from crying completely.

I had already shed silent tears over Mommy's death, but this was the first time I sobbed aloud.

"I haven't forgotten her, and I'm still sad when I remember, but time will dull most of the pain," he said, answering my question about the secret to not being sad over loss.

I sat beside him on the bench and looked up at his face with a smile—it was then I realized his eyes were different colors.

"They're red? Your eyes?"

"...!"

Wanting to see the eyes he suddenly hid, I edged toward him on the bench. Every five inches I scooted closer, he would scoot back another five.

He was clearly panicking in front of me, and I leaned forward with excitement over his panic. I caught a glimpse of the shimmering red glow hidden between the cracks in his fingers. Rather than being the red of flames, they held a slight pink tinge. The first thing to cross my mind was the gem I read about in the library the other day.

"They're so pretty! Your eyes are pretty, Mister!"

"...Huh?"

Spurred on by a desire to see the brilliant red glow again, I desperately tried to catch another glimpse of his eyes through his hands. He resisted by trying to push me away.

“Quit it.”

“They’re like jewels! Your eyes are jewels! Like rubies!” I said what I thought. He froze with a strange look on his face. He stared at me like he was staring at a strange object. Confused, I tilted my head.

The scenery suddenly blurred on me. Everything surrounding me changed and I grew in an instant. The me who should have been sitting on a bench was being held by someone. And I, or rather we, were flying through the sky. Not in the metaphorical sense—this was reality.

Black wings made of mist jutted out of the back of the man who held me in his warm embrace. The surroundings were too dark to make out his face, but he looked just like the man I met as a child.

His hair was shorter than the Mister I met, and he gave off a more mature image, but his ruby-like eyes were the same.

“Your eyes are so pretty. They stand out somewhat, but they are like rubies,” I commented on them like it was a trivial matter because I remembered nothing of our past. He blinked several times and made the same strange face as the man I called Mister.

Both his and Mister’s face overlapped.

Oh, they really were the same person. The moment that dawned on me, my eyes were seared by a blinding light.

I slowly opened my eyes. The first thing to enter my vision was the ceiling I had become familiar with over the past few months.

“Azusa?” someone nervously called my name.

I turned my head in the direction of the voice—my eyes met with those of the man who had just been flying through the sky with me in his arms. My dazed mind couldn’t differentiate between dream and reality yet.

“Mister?”

He grimaced in an amusingly exaggerated way before stiffening.

Normal POV

“MISTER?”

Her words were like a paralysis spell for Kouya. The last time Azusa called him that was thirteen years ago and she shouldn’t have any memory of that time.

“...Did you remember something?” he asked, patting the top of her head as she lay in bed. Her eyes widened.

“What? You really are the Mister from that time, Kouya?”

“.....”

“Really? How? Did I meet you when I was little? Wait a minute—that happened more than thirteen years ago, right? Your appearance hasn’t changed at all, has it?”

“.....”

“...Kouya?”

“...Those are all reasonable questions and I want to answer them for you, but first...”

Azusa instinctively squeaked at the dark aura coming from Kouya.

This means he’s angry. He’s totally enraged! She considered what could make him so angry and instantly came to the answer. *Right, I got in the way of Kouya trying to kill Youta!*

She clearly remembered up to the point where she got in the way of Kouya and Youta and nothing else. She guessed someone knocked her out. Nothing hurt, so she safely assumed she didn’t get injured.

“I-I’m so sorry for getting in your way. But I was desperate at the time...”

“.....”

“But I still didn’t want you to kill Youta or to watch you hurt yourself that way...”

“.....”

“Ah! That’s right! What happened to Youta? Is he all right?! You didn’t kill him, did you? Is he in one piece? Are you unharmed too?”

“...Enough. Don’t talk.”

“Eh?”

He lifted her off the bed, pulling her into a hug. The arms wrapped around her back squeezed her so tightly it hurt. She was more confused than ever. What happened to turn what she thought was going to be an angry lecture into a loving embrace? She could hear his heart beat faster than usual.

“You’re alive, right?”

“Yes, I am alive.”

“Do you hurt anywhere? Is anything different?”

“I’m fine. The same as usual.”

“Your body is hot. Do you have a fever?”

“...No, I think you are imagining that part, Kouya,” she answered from his arms. The last question was the only one she didn’t answer honestly. He slowly let go. And then...

“The next time you do something that dangerous I’m going to tie you to a chair and not let you take a step outside ever again. Got it?” he lectured her with his fiercest face yet.

Chapter 66: Epilogue

“**KOUYA**, I want to go visit him!” Azusa exclaimed. She sat up in bed, frowning to show her discontent.

Three days had passed since she woke up. During those three days, she was rarely allowed out of her room. Ichi or Kouya were always present in the room with her, and Ichi consistently followed her into the bathroom when she showered or used the toilet.

Naturally, as long as she was in her room, she could freely walk around, but Azusa still felt a tremendous sense of being shut in against her will.

Their overly protective behavior made her suspicious; especially when all they told her was that she had passed out from a case of anemia. She continued to ask what the real reason was, but she typically got the same answer back.

“We want you to wait a little longer,” was what everyone told her.

Her missing memories of the time she passed out created her current predicament. She had a vague idea something bad had happened, and being the energetic girl she was, being confined without anyone telling her why was unbearable.

On the third day of her confinement, she finally decided to take drastic measures.

Kouya sighed at her explosion of dissatisfaction, closed the book he was reading, and directed an exasperated look her way.

“Visit who? No one took a more serious injury than you.”

“Youta, obviously! I am as lively as can be! You, Ichi, Subaru, and everyone else are just over worrying about me!” Azusa posed with both fists in front of her to show off her healthiness, only to be met with an icy gaze.

“I told you before that Youta is fine. We’re safeguarding him here just in case. You don’t have to visit him. If you want to that badly, it doesn’t have to be today, but can wait for another day, right?”

“And when will that *another day* come, huh? I totally understand you guys are doing this out of worry for me! But this situation is insanely bothersome to bear when I don’t even know the reason for it! Either tell me why or allow me to move freely within the mansion! I am going to die from boredom!” Azusa fell prostrate on her comforter, covering her face as if she were trying to persuade him with a sob story this time. Kouya winced.

“Isn’t this the same as when you guys had me confined as a prisoner? It’s not like I want to go outside the mansion, and I will immediately return to my room once I see Youta, so...can’t I?” she

pleaded, lifting her face slightly from the comforter to peak at Kouya. His brow was furrowed, his expression a mix of conflicted emotions rather than annoyance.

After a small pause, he hoarsely squeezed out, "...You can't."

"Kouya."

"Deal with it."

"....." She glared at him with pouting lips. He turned his face away to escape her gaze. He refused to budge. She sighed as her shoulders dropped dejectedly.

"...Fine then. In that case, will you chat with me to deter my boredom?"

"I can do that much for you. What's up?"

"My memories are all jumbled up, so can you start by telling me what happened on the day Youta fell to F rank? After I had lunch with Tsukiharu—"

The chair Kouya sat on scraped the floor as he jumped to his feet. He swiftly headed to the door to leave.

"Kouya, where are you going?"

"...I'm going to change shifts with Ichi. I just remembered urgent business."

"What? Out of the blue?"

"Why, indeed? Perhaps there's something he doesn't want you to remember, Azusa."

Azusa looked up at the sudden voice that belonged to neither her nor Kouya. She turned her head in search of the visitor to find a familiar face sitting on the windowsill.

"Tsukiharu!"

"You're here?" Kouya snarled, countering the joy in Azusa's voice. Tsukiharu jumped into Azusa's room with his usual aloof smirk.

"What a warm welcome, Akaoni. It's been a while, huh, Azusa. You doing okay?"

"Yup. How about you, Tsukiharu?"

"I've been well, of course. I only just moved into this mansion. Shiro's betrayal became as evident as can be, so I couldn't stick around my old hiding place. But knowing I can see you every day now is the greatest happiness for me," Tsukiharu smiled sweetly. Azusa grinned broadly back at him. Kouya's face soured beside them.

"How did you get into this room, Tsukiharu? We have a barrier around the entire room—"

"I smashed through it, obviously! You had a fairly tough one up, so it was a pain to break! I had to circle around to the window to find the weakest spot..." Tsukiharu answered like it was only natural he should break the barrier. Kouya put a hand to his head.

"Why are you always so—"

“No worries. I’ll properly put up an even stronger barrier! I want to protect Azusa too...” Tsukiharu said, all smiles from beginning to end. Perplexed, Azusa cocked her head at him.

“Protect me? And what’s this about a barrier—”

“Oh, about that—”

“Tsukiharu,” Kouya raised his voice, warning him not to say more.

“Fine, fine,” Tsukiharu reluctantly assented. “Well, I’ll tell you once we gather more information. Anyway, I came here to see you today! I thought you might be bored sick about now.”

“You’re amazing, Tsukiharu! Right on the mark!”

Kouya’s brow seemed to cave in with bitterness over Azusa’s apparent happiness. Tsukiharu triumphantly puffed out his chest and smirked at the unhappy Kouya.

“Although I say that, I can’t let you out of this room, and my opinion holds the same as that blockhead there for wanting you to stay inside, so I probably can’t grant your wish... Instead, I brought you a great present,” Tsukiharu said and opened the door. Azusa was startled by who stood on the other side.

“Kii! Yuu! And Youta too!”

“Hiya! How’re you doing?”

“Um, is this...eek!”

“Hi there, Azusa, brother. Long time no see.”

They each entered her room with different reactions. Kii and Youta casually came inside, but Yuu cautiously looked from Kouya to Azusa from the doorway.

“Not coming in?”

“Hahaha! I will come in!” Yuu practically leapt into the room at Kouya’s question. She clung to Kii’s arm that was the farthest from Kouya.

“Hey, Yuu, didn’t I tell you it would be fine? He’s not as scary as he looks. Also, Youta, you just called Kouya your brother...is he your brother? I never heard about that before...”

“It’s true. I wasn’t trying to hide it. It’s pointless to be scared of my brother, Miss Yamamoto,” Youta smiled, referring to Yuu by her last name. His cheery demeanor relieved Azusa. The reality of his safety finally settled in.

“Coming for a visit is fine, but why did you pick them?” Kouya asked Tsukiharu out of curiosity with one eyebrow raised. It was hard to say any of the people present got along well, but they were on better terms than before.

“I only invited Youta to come. I simply captured these two when I spotted them wandering in front of the mansion. They said they came to see Azusa.”

“We were worried sick because Azusa has been absent from school for days now. Things ended with no one telling us anything about what went down in the schoolyard. Aren’t you asking a lot by telling us not to worry?” Kii questioned. Yuu nodded several times behind her.

“You didn’t see what happened?”

“Your enemy shot out a ton of whirlwinds, right? The dust and dirt they kicked up made watching what went down the least of our concerns. Not to mention, the twisters that came right for us... Anyway, I’m just glad to see you’re okay, Azusa! If anything had happened to you, I’d probably find myself dead at Kouya’s hands for pushing you to get involved,” Kii dryly laughed. Youta glanced down awkwardly, guilt written across his face.

Seeing Youta’s reaction, Tsukiharu spoke up in a cheerier voice than usual, “Setting that aside, what is it you’re holding, Kii? A get well gift?”

“Oh, this? More than a gift, I thought it would be fun to talk if I was allowed inside for a visit, so we dropped by the convenience store to buy snacks and—”

“And juice,” Yuu finished Kii’s sentence and held up the plastic bag in her hand. Juice and snacks filled the bags. One bag even had paper cups and plates.

Azusa’s eyes sparkled at the contents, “These are the new limited edition foods I wanted to eat!”

“Right? I thought you’d love them! If it’s all right with you, let’s have a girl’s party right here and now!”

“By girl’s party, does that mean I can’t join in?” Tsukiharu flashed a smile at the girls. Yuu’s cheeks flushed red.

“Okay, let’s rename our girl’s party to a snack party then!” Kii suggested and everyone, except Kouya, cheerfully agreed. Kouya opened the door with a troubled smile.

“Where are you going, Kouya?” Youta asked.

“I’ll leave the room. I’ll be right outside the door, so call me if anything comes up.”

Dissatisfied by his response, Youta and Kii both puffed out their cheeks.

“Aw, you should just stay with us.”

“You really should. I will feel oh-so-bad if you leave now because it will seem like we made you leave,” Kii pouted.

“Don’t worry about me. Besides, I don’t know what would be considered appropriate topics for discussion.”

“Why don’t we invite Ichi and Subaru then? You won’t have to feel out of place that way, Kouya!” Azusa suggested. Youta jumped at her suggestion. Tsukiharu sharply picked up on his reaction and

elbowed him in the side.

“What’s this? You don’t want her here, Youta? You would have jumped for joy at that suggestion before.”

“It’s not that I don’t want her here, but I’m torn because I’ve shown her nothing but my pathetic side lately... How do I put it? I don’t know how to face her—”

The door suddenly opened just as Youta smiled bitterly. Ichi burst into the room.

“Kouya! Do you know where Youta is? His room was empty when I went to check on him. All I found was Tsukiharu’s note—wait, Youta?!”

“Kou, you here? The blood test results just came out—uh, what’s with all the people?” Subaru blurted seeing what was unfolding inside Azusa’s room. Everyone was in the middle of laying out the snacks around Kii and Yuu in the middle of the room. “Um? Is something about to start here? Who are these girls?”

“We’re Azusa’s classmates! We’re about to hold a snack party. Would you two like to join us?” Kii happily invited Ichi and Subaru who blinked at the same time.

In the end, they held the snack party with all eight of them. The conversation was mostly held between the students and Ichi, who were all giggling over some trivial topics. Kouya and Subaru watched over them from a corner of the room.

“What can I say? Things are peaceful, huh?”

“I agree,” Kouya assented with a soft expression. Subaru saw his expression and sadly lowered his gaze.

“I wish things could go on this way forever...”

“That wouldn’t be reality then, would it?”

Kouya held his hand out to Subaru. Subaru handed him the envelope he was holding. Kouya sighed at what was documented inside.

“Almost all of it is what we suspected. Azusa’s blood possesses the capability to change the makeup of a vampire’s body. Just like how Youta turned into a normal human from it and how it turned a healthy vampire into an F...”

Kouya sighed a second time, this time bearing the weight and severity of what was to come.

Afterword

Thank you very much for reading *Akaoni: Contract with a Vampire*. I am the author, Hiroro. This work is my first full-length novel, which I am thrilled to see published in English. The original manuscript is in Japanese, but I believe this English translation will bring it to an even wider readership. That thought alone brings joy as well as a sobering reality.

I plan on releasing a second volume, so I hope you can wait in anticipation for it. I look forward to greeting you again in volume two.

-Hiroro



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